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Writing Instruction in Second Language Classrooms

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The purpose of this paper is to examine research intended to facilitate the instruction of writing in second language classrooms. Since writing is both a skill and an art, empirical studies of writing present some uncertainty. Traditionally, research on composition has viewed writing as a product. These studies consequently examined the efficacy of one grammar over another under the assumption that a pedagogical approach that would best develop students' writing should focus on usage, structure, and correctness of form. Little attention was paid to considerations such as purpose, audience, and the process of composing itself. Because of the emphasis on product, instructors utilized methods and materials intended to promote correct usage rather than real communication.

However, during the last decade, there has been a major paradigm shift in composition theory and research. Writing is no longer viewed as an isolated act but rather as "a definitive and integral part of daily human communication" (Muller and Wiener, 1991, p. 1). Hence, recent research has begun to investigate the composing process itself in the belief that before instructors can teach writing, they must first understand how we write. The findings of such studies seriously challenge the ways in which writing has been taught in the past and "militate

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against prescriptive approaches to the teaching of writing” (Witte and Faigley, 1981, p.202). It is therefore important that ESL writing instructors take into account current research concerning the teaching of writing in second language classrooms.

Integration of the Components of Language

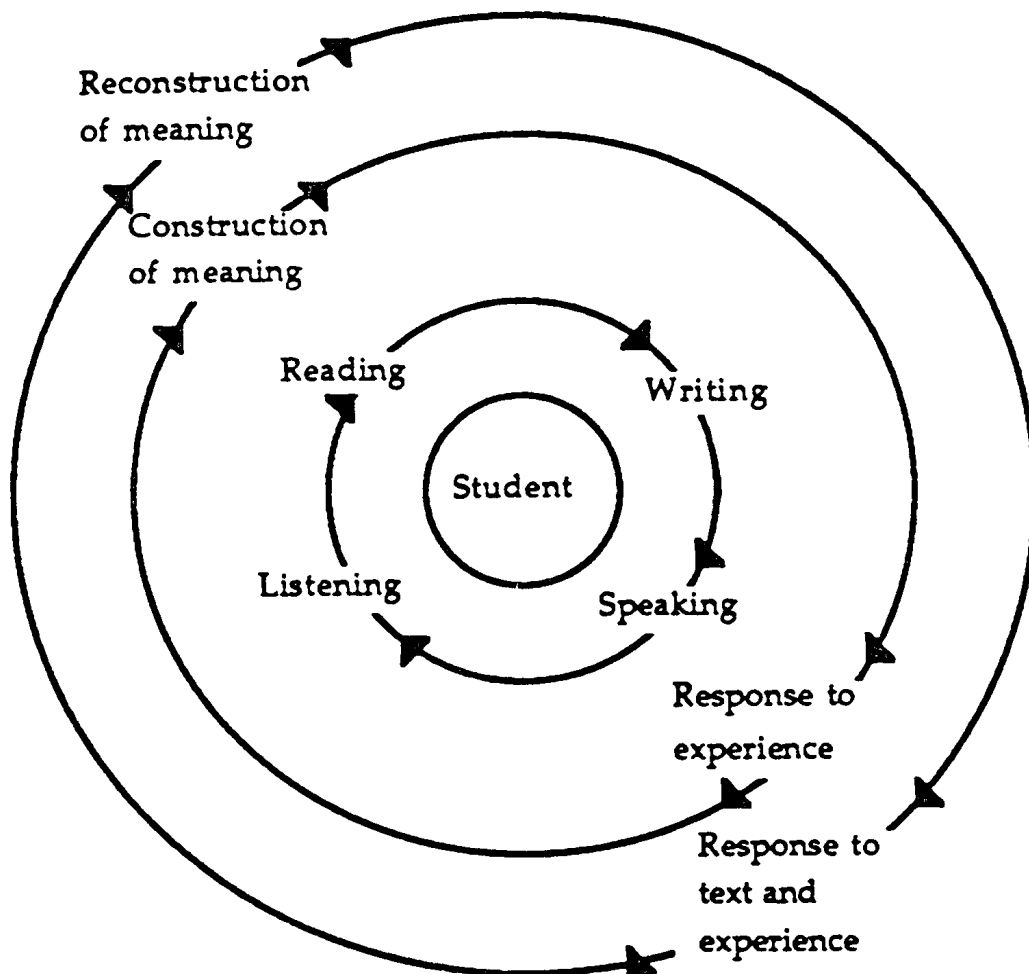
The process of effective writing may be viewed as a complex activity involving thinking, discussing, reading, prewriting, drafting, revising and editing (Kroll, 1990). Thus, the interrelationship of the four components of language is an integral consideration in developing writing skills. Through reading, writing, listening, and speaking, students respond to experience and construct meaning. The exchange of ideas and interpretations allows students to respond to both text and experience in order to reconstruct meaning and to formulate responses.

Both speaking and writing are processes of composing--of selecting and organizing information. Discussion is effectively used during prewriting and revision to clarify meaning. Similarly, the same cognitive processes are involved in comprehending a spoken and a written message; both these processes include attention to detail, recall, inference, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation: “Whether writing, reading, speaking or listening, the concern is with meaning; writer, reader, speaker, and listener draw on their experience and knowledge as they create and recreate meaning” (Messenger and Taylor, 1984, p. 5).

The interrelationship of the components of language is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

Petrosky (1982) states that writing about reading is one of the best ways to get students to “unravel their transactions so that we can see how they understand” (p. 24). Sage (1987) also links recent composition

Figure 1 Interrelationship of the Components of Language



Source: Cunliffe, B., Begin, S. (1988) An Introduction to Literature for ESL Students. Edmonton: University of Alberta. p. 7.

research and recent reading research as both these processes focus on constructing meaning from text and background knowledge. Consequently, these authors advocate teaching writing in conjunction with teaching reading. A review of the literature further reveals that writing, reading, and responding, often taught separately, can be viewed as similar processes of "constructing meaning from words, text, prior knowledge, and feelings" (Petrosky, 1982, p. 22). Interactive activities such as class or small group discussions which facilitate the exchange of ideas and interpretations, help students' understanding, and assist

them in constructing meaning are promoted. Hence, as the literature indicates, topics for students' essays should be developed through prereading activities, discussions, prewriting activities, readings, and notes so that students benefit from instruction which emphasizes the interrelatedness of the components of language.

The Process Approach to Writing

Recent composition research suggests that writing is a complex process involving much more than grammatical instruction and formula writing. Composing is a recursive series of complex intellectual cognitive processes in which a writer explores, researches, and develops a topic for a real purpose and audience (Connor, 1990; Hamp-Lyons, 1992; Liebman-Kleine, 1986; Raimes, 1983; Santos, 1988). In contrast to personal letters and journal entries where content is spontaneous and unplanned, academic writing is an imposed task which requires attention to the conventions of academic discourse, the expectations of the instructor, the context of the course, and the terms of the assignment. Approaching this writing can be less threatening and more productive when strategies in gathering information, planning, and revising are applied. The process paradigm "teaches strategies for invention and discovery; considers audience, purpose, and content of writing; emphasizes recursiveness in the writing process; and distinguishes between aim and modes of discourse" (Connor, 1987, p. 677).

According to Santos (1988), college and university professors view intellectual and factual content of student essays as more important than syntactic deficiencies. The pedagogical implications of Santos' (1988) study investigating professors' reactions to second language students' essays are that his findings support the current approach to

teaching writing as a process of planning, composing, revising, and editing. Since ESL students need to focus their skills in the areas that most affect content such as organization, development, and support for their arguments, the process approach, which emphasizes these areas, is the most appropriate for ESL classrooms. Santos (1988) additionally states that, on the linguistic level, professors consider lexical errors the most serious. Hence, he suggests “units on vocabulary building and lexical selection should be incorporated into an ESL writing course” (p. 85).

In his review of research on grammar instruction, Krashen (1985) adopts Chomsky’s (1965) central concept of writing: the distinction between competence and performance in writing. Krashen (1985) defines competence as the knowledge a proficient writer has about writing, whereas performance is the ability to put knowledge about writing to use in an actual composition. He claims that competence in writing does not come directly from the study of grammatical structures and discourse rules and that performance can be improved if efficient writing processes are taught and practiced. In the process paradigm, emphasis on correctness has similarly been replaced by a concern for meaning.

Although most educators would agree that writing should be defined as more than a product to be graded for correctness, the slogan “process versus product” perhaps oversimplifies the issue. As Liebman-Kleine (1986) points out, “writing is, or can be, both a process and a product” (p. 786). In the process orientation, the edited final draft becomes just one part of the task rather than the only thing that matters. Hence, “the process approach views writing as learning: the product approach views writing as display” (Liebman-Kleine, 1986, p. 787).

Process teaching and evaluation not only asks that instructors teach students to write but also demands judgment of competence based on more than the correctness of the product. As a result, students realize that even professional writers do not produce a perfectly polished piece of writing in one draft. In the process orientation, students are encouraged to work through multiple drafts where early ideas are discarded and others added, paragraphs are reorganized, diction and syntax are changed, and errors are corrected. Thus, process is “a concept that enables people to see writing in a new way and thereby ask questions that were not asked as long as people saw writing simply as finished products” (Liebman-Kleine, 1986, p. 785).

However, the process orientation is not unchallenged. Horowitz (1986) criticizes the process approach to academic writing which he believes has been uncritically accepted and “miscast as a complete theory of writing” (p. 141). In his discussion of the shortcomings of this approach, he states that the process approach fails to prepare students to write essay examinations. That is, an approach which emphasizes writing multiple drafts to promote fluency does not facilitate fast essay writing under pressure. In addition, he attacks the process approach for not preparing students to deal with the academic writing they face on entering university, such as highly structured assignments and impersonal topics.

Horowitz (1986) further disparagingly discusses the inductive orientation of the process approach to writing since he believes that many students produce better essays by first writing careful outlines. He suggests that the inductive approach fails to prepare students for academic writing tasks which usually require them to present data from research sources according to explicit instructions. He further states that since university students rarely have free choice of topics,

teaching them to write intelligently on topics they do not care about is more beneficial than allowing them to choose topics which interest them: “the gentle approach of process-oriented classrooms may foster a false impression of the realities of academia, where our students’ product-oriented attitudes may in fact be more adaptive” (Horowitz, 1986, p. 143).

In Horowitz’s (1986) view, the humanistic process approach also gives students a false impression of how university writing will be evaluated. He believes that the abstractions and general strategies of process teachers do not take into account the writing behaviours dictated by the academic community and hence creates an ESL classroom which bears little resemblance to the university setting where those skills will eventually be exercised. Thus, this educator warns against embracing an overall process approach since “an awareness of realistic academic demands seem to be totally lacking from the process consciousness” (Horowitz, 1986, p. 789).

In response to criticisms of the process approach, other researchers defend the process orientation and point out that the dichotomy between process and product approaches is neither productive nor real. Liebman-Kleine (1986) indicates that such a division reveals an extremely limited view of the process approach which is not a single approach but many approaches enabling instructors to view writing in a new way. She further points out that the process approach subsumes the product approach and involves thinking about ideas, audience, situation, and purpose. Process writing also includes writing from sources, writing essay examinations, and thinking about the best way to write for a specific purpose.

Moreover, Liebman-Kleine (1986) decries those who characterize the process approach as consisting solely of writing student journals, or

writing about personal topics, or ignoring organization. She states, "I have never met a process teacher who believed or stated such things; I hope I never do" (p. 786). On the contrary, process teachers encourage students to write outlines to see whether it is helpful for them; they also suggest that with some assignments students try free writing. Process teachers strive to help students develop different strategies intended to assist different students deal with different writing tasks in different situations. Hence, process teachers aim to give students strategies which will help them "to figure out how to find a process that will enable them to handle the current writing task and situation" (Liebman-Kleine, 1986, p. 787).

Hamp-Lyons (1986) similarly defends the process approach and suggests that it has shown superiority over product approaches "in humanistic terms, in terms of student involvement and interaction and therefore motivation" (p. 790). She additionally states that inductive and deductive strategies as well as cognitive and effective preferences are all incorporated in a process approach. As a result, in process writing classrooms, students brainstorm and outline, engage in solitary and social composing, peer edit and so on, to account for both different writing preferences and varied writing tasks. For as Hamp-Lyons (1986) further indicates, "if the purpose of the writer's processes is a product, then a better understanding of the processes can hardly have a negative impact on the product" (p. 793).

Murray (1986) says, "writing is exploration--discovery of meaning, discovery of form--and the writer works back and forth...so he can discover what he has to say and how to say it more efficiently" (p. 1). Hence, learning sequences should give students opportunity to gain increasing sophistication in expressing and communicating their ideas. The aim of a writing course is to assist students to express ideas,

feelings, and reactions, without being preoccupied with correctness, by writing frequently and extensively in order to increase fluency. The emphasis is on strong statements of theme with appropriate diction, form, organization, and methods of support--an emphasis best achieved through a process approach to writing.

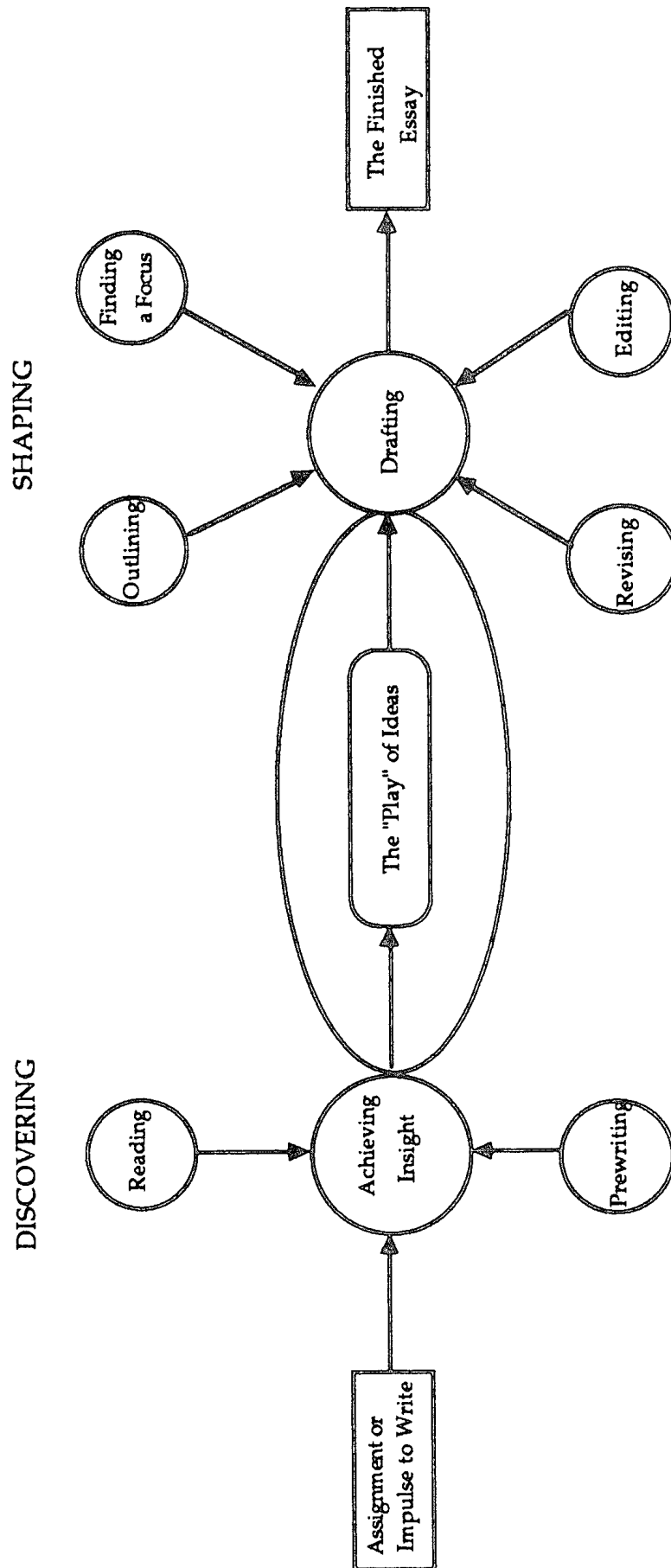
The Composing Process

According to Grassi and DeBlois (1984), the composing process, which begins with an assignment or an impulse to write, involves both discovering insights and shaping responses. This complex, cognitive process approach to writing is represented in Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, students achieve insights through reading and prewriting. An exchange of ideas helps students find a focus and outline preliminary drafts. Recent studies all indicate the importance of prewriting activities (Connor, 1990; Hamp-Lyons, 1992; Hook, 1982; Liebman-Kleine, 1986; Messenger and Taylor, 1984). For many ESL students, the most difficult part of any writing assignment is determining what to write about. Prewriting activities are intended to help students generate ideas and discover and express meaning. Thus, in the prewriting component of a writing course, students generate ideas, brainstorm, discuss, consider organizational approaches, free-write, peer-edit, engage in solitary and social composing, and so on.

Revising and editing early responses encourages students to value finished products as evidence of their best writing. Strategies such as editing in groups or as a class, using peer editing where students work in pairs when proofreading, teaching students to read aloud, and praising what students do well rather than focusing on errors improve the quality of writing. In brief, students work with the content and form

Figure 2 The Composing Process

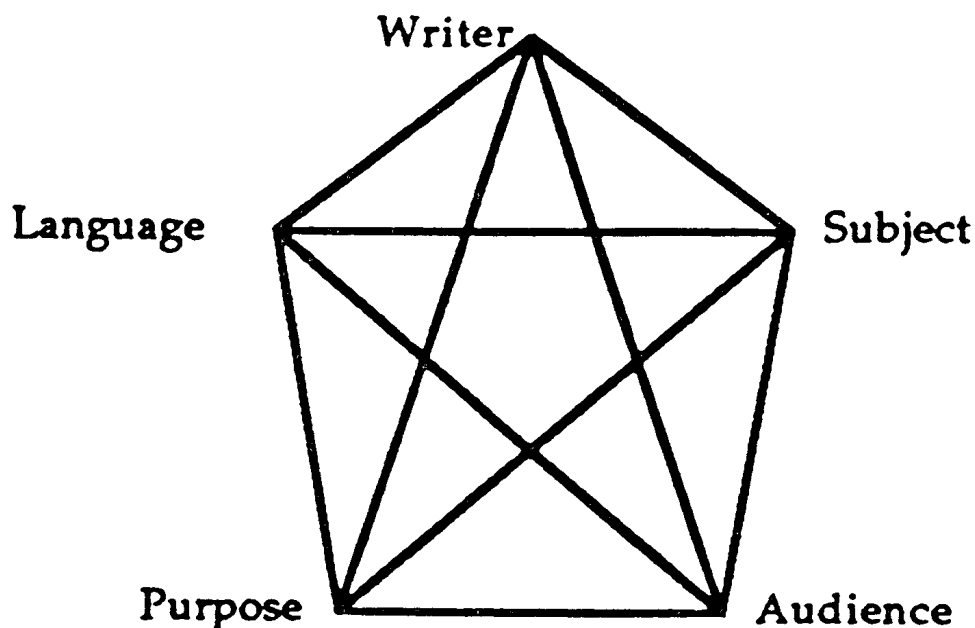


Source: Grassi, R., DeBlois, P. (1984) Composition and Literature. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc. p. 15

of what eventually will become their finished products. Success with content, organization, style, tone, and mechanics should be the goals for students' final drafts.

Furthermore, to be effective, students must consider the interaction of subject, language, audience and purpose. As Messenger and Taylor (1984) suggest, the elements of writing interact within the rhetorical context. This interaction is represented diagrammatically in Figure 3. As can be seen in Figure 3, writers must consider their audience and purpose for writing. Also, the language of essays must be congruent with the reason for writing and with the expectations of the intended audience. The writer is concerned with developing clear communication appropriate for audience and purpose to fulfill the terms of the assignment. The goal is to help students analyze the whole by looking at the function of each part in order to recognize that good writing does

Figure 3 Interaction of the Elements of Writing



Source: Messenger, W.E., Taylor P.A. (1984). Elements of Writing.
Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada, Inc. p. 2.

not just happen but results from careful planning.

Thus, the composing process is a complex recursive activity which goes far beyond the simple think--outline--write linear process of much ESL student work. A wide variety of activities and assignments should therefore be employed in writing courses to engage students in the process of expressing responses in order to develop the skills necessary to write effectively. As Horowitz (1986) demonstrates, attention to writing as product is essential if students are to ultimately function within a university setting. Even so, in order to teach writing, instructors do not have to reject the process paradigm. An integrated theory of writing that includes both process and product is of benefit to both teachers and students to best develop students' fluency and accuracy.

Error Correction and Feedback

Although Horowitz (1986) claims that the process orientation creates a false impression of how writing will be evaluated, Hamp-Lyons (1986) argues that process approaches to error and feedback are beneficial to both students and teachers. She states, "teachers and learners alike have been swimming (or drowning) in a sea of red ink for years" (p. 790). The teacher who considers writing as product will serve as a negative evaluator, red-marking violations of syntactic and grammatical rules, generally with little concern for originality or development of ideas. In the product approach, teachers and tests serve as gatekeepers in the belief that if students are correct, they will write well.

On the contrary, research clearly indicates that the salience of feedback on error has little, if any, effect on writing quality (Fathman

and Whalley, 1990; Sheal and Wood, 1981; Wingfield, 1975). Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) investigated the effects of four methods of providing feedback on written error: complete correction of lexical, syntactic and stylistic errors, an abbreviated code system identifying the type of errors, uncoded feedback indicating the location of errors, and numerical totaling of errors per line. They found that practice in writing over time resulted in gradual increases in the writing quality of all four groups regardless of the method of feedback.

Similarly, Wingfield (1975) found little difference in effect on writing quality among five techniques of dealing with errors, and suggests that ESL students can only assimilate a small amount of corrective feedback into their current grammatical systems. Sheal and Wood (1981) examined the value of using proof-reading exercises taken from student writing to enable students to correct their own writing and to make classes more interesting. They conclude that students are able to correct many of their own and other students' errors if they spend ten minutes proof-reading. Furthermore, students seem to find proof-reading interesting and lively since the problem-solving element interests them as they discuss and argue about errors. As Raimes (1983) indicates, responding to students' writing should be part of the process of writing and "not just tacked on to the end of the teaching sequence" (p. 139).

These researchers indicate that although product teachers spend a great deal of time responding to the mechanics of student writing, less time-consuming methods of directing students' attention to surface errors are equally effective. Corrective feedback on sentence level errors addresses only one aspect of student writing ability and is more productive in a problem-solving context (Sheal and Wood, 1981). Alternately, a more effective process approach is to respond to global

problems of planning and content in students' writing with comments which direct writers back to the initial stages of composing where they are reshaping and restructuring their meaning, delaying feedback on mechanical errors until the final stage of editing (Hamp-Lyons, 1986; Liebman-Kleine, 1986; Raimes, 1983).

Accordingly, writing instructors should delay concern with aspects of correctness for later drafts of students' writing, with specific grammatical instruction appropriately timed. Since research has shown that the teaching of formal grammar has either little or negative effect on students' writing if divorced from the writing process (Krashen, 1985), grammar should be taught when a specific need for it emerges in students' assignments. Hence, in writing courses, short lessons on aspects of grammar with which several students are encountering difficulties should be included in the editing process. Editing students' work in groups or as a class allows the instructor to incorporate grammar instruction and relate it to students' writing.

Techniques which facilitate correctness include providing ample practice to write all kinds of discourse. Since learning to write requires writing, writing practice should be a major focus of all writing courses. As they read over their drafts, students should be directed to check for clarity of ideas and expressions. Are thoughts unified: do they relate to an obvious main point? Are thoughts coherent: do they follow a logical plan, one idea flowing smoothly into the next? Which ideas require expansion with details? Which ideas should be eliminated? Which thoughts and words are vague or imprecise? Furthermore, as Raimes (1983) states "noticing and praising what a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly" (p. 143).

Thus, to incorporate current research in second language educa-

tion, viewing writing as a process rather than a product is an integral consideration. Even though experts advocate both process and product approaches to writing, an integrated theory of writing that includes both is of most benefit to develop a framework for activities that best provide a sound basis to facilitate students' writing growth.

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