

# **APPLICATION OF THE PROCESS APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

*Dr. S.A. U. Ituen*

## **Abstract**

The paper presents insights from research on the nature of children's writing and discusses the inappropriateness of the product approach currently used in schools as a tool for the teaching of writing to young people. It proposes the use of the process approach involving prewriting, writing and rewriting, and presents strategies for the utilization of this approach.

## **Introduction**

Pupils come to the classroom with ideas, experiences and feelings. They attach importance to what is vital and of interest to them. The duty of the teacher in the essay' writing class is to discover ways of encouraging the children to write about their experiences with delight. Calkins (1986:6) has rightly pointed to three interconnected elements which are essential for successful teaching of writing to young people. These are deep involvement of children in writing, opportunities to share their texts with others and the perception of themselves as authors. These features receive full attention in classrooms where the teacher employs the process approach to the teaching of writing.

The traditional manner of teaching writing involves the utilization of the product approach and, unfortunately, this is what is currently prevalent in our schools. The product approach focuses on linguistic accuracy, involving the correction of discrete grammatical items at the sentence level while the level of attention given to the organization of ideas is exceedingly low. This accounts for the type of response teachers usually give to pupils' essays. Sutton (1981: 13) for example, has stated:

Reading what children have to say about the way in which their written work is received, one cannot help but pick up the same refrains over and over again. The teacher is often seen as the 'judge, jury and hangman'.

Given the nature of practices associated with the teaching of writing in our schools, our children's inability to write is not surprising. It should be borne in mind that language, whether spoken or written, is primarily a communication tool. Therefore, written composition should be taught, as "organized communication" (Ling, 1986: 65) and the process approach seems eminently suitable for this purpose. Recent research into the teaching of writing has yielded results which teachers and teacher trainers involved in the teaching of writing as a process will find useful. Some of these investigations will be presented here briefly.

## **Insights from Research**

Theories of writing development advanced by Britton (1975), Bereiter (1980) and Moffet (1981) have emphasized that the development in one's writing is made possible by the development of the writer. In other words, the writer's cognitive development impacts positively on his ability to write. These authors view writing development as the writer's ability to display a progressively more abstract treatment of subject matter, ability to write for a generalized audience more and more remote from the self, and the capacity to use increasingly more complex grammatical forms for the expression of ideas. In all these processes, development is best enhanced by activities which make children express their own thoughts because it is with respect to such contexts that children are able to display their emotional involvement with the subject matter (Carlin, 1986: 182). Methods of teaching writing which fail to engage the learners emotionally have practically no chance of helping them to write effectively.

Barbers and Nicholls (1986) have established a model of the writing process for young learners based on their observation and analysis of infant and primary pupils' writing over a one-year period, 'the model is meant to help teachers determine priorities for individual teaching. The model comprises four levels. Levels one and two are those of pre-independent

writing while levels three and four belong to the independent writing category. The levels do not correspond to specific classes; the classification is meant to be used in a flexible manner by each teacher depending on the nature of his

class. Each level has a composing aspect and a performing aspect. Some of the elements will be briefly described here because of the useful insights they provide.

Level one is that of orientation towards writing. It helps the child to learn that writing serves the purpose of coding meaning. The composing aspect contains two elements - sign concept and word concept. The sign concept can be conveyed visually as well as through speech. The word concept makes the child realize that what one uses for writing are words, not pictures. Some of the elements in the performing aspect include helping the child to control writing implement, recognize some written words (e.g. own name, father's name), recognize word spacing, produce some letter shapes and distinguish some initial sounds.

Level two is concerned with initial text-making; the child's own meaning is coded in words. The composing aspect comprises letter concept, sentence concept and spelling awareness. Some of the elements in the performing aspect are: to form and orientate letters and to begin collecting a vocabulary of words that can be written unaided. The teacher undertakes collaborative text-making with the child. For example, the child draws a picture and the teacher collaborates with him to compose a caption to it. The teacher writes down the words, she utters them as she proceeds; the child watches and learns how it is done. Similarly, the teacher prompts the child to narrate a story while the teacher writes down only what the child has said. The child's name is written at the end as the author of the text. By the third level, the children can copy texts with relative ease and are ready to begin writing independently. By the fourth level, pupils are "usually very confident writers" and no longer are they "unnecessarily constrained by the performing aspect of writing". Bauers and Nicholls (1986: 149) point out that at this stage, pupils "usually enjoy exercising their newly learned ability to set down their ideas as they come to mind". Also, pupils list these ideas sequentially and the texts end when the ideas run out. It is important that teachers use appropriate strategies to nurture the pupils' desire to write. As will be shown later, the significant features highlighted here are relevant for the teaching of writing as a process.

Wilkinson (1986: 49) identifies three aspects in the treatment of self and others in children's essays. The first is the formal category of information provided in children's essays. They include name, age, weight, address, family members and possessions. The second category comprises actions, many of which are irrelevant in describing people, for example, going to school, market or church, sleeping. It also includes some more relevant ones like achievements, crimes and oddities. The third group is made up of dispositional items. These include information about people's temperament, character and personality and permit the reader to understand the person being described. On the basis of his examination of a large body of essays written by children, Wilkinson (1986: 51-52) states that the descriptions of self and others in the essays of children aged 10 and below are non-selective. They include features in categories one and two above. Their treatment of elements in category three is limited to "a few conventional dispositional items". An awareness of characteristic features in pupils' essays is important since it helps teachers to plan how to orientate learners so that they begin to write more effective essays.

### **The Process Approach**

The traditional manner of teaching writing at the primary level involves exposing children to controlled and guided writing with the hope that at higher levels, learners should be able to handle such forms as narrative, descriptive and expository writing. Children are exposed to models produced by good writers. As the children are assigned topics to write on, they are expected to show evidence of reasonable mastery of the art of writing. It is agonizing to teachers to find that the vast majority of the learners fail to meet their expectations. But this phenomenon is not surprising at all because the teachers fail to adopt a process capable of leading the children to the desired goal. The pattern adopted by teachers as described above, is the product approach. Basically, it involves teaching elements of writing, assigning essay topics for learners to write, waiting for the assignment to be completed, collecting, evaluating and returning the essays to the pupils. The most important element of this pattern of teaching is the final product and, as Stewart (1988:17) has observed, it is not communication but "superficial mechanical correctness" that is given priority as teachers mark the essays.

In the process approach, the teacher does not merely wait for the child to come up with the final product. The focus is on the writing process itself. The teacher works with every child as the essay is emerging because if the various phases of the essay are properly handled, the final product is bound to be acceptable. The phases in the process approach are categorized differently by different writers but generally they include prewriting, writing and rewriting (McCrimmon, 1974; Britton, 1975; Sommers, 1988; Kirszner and Mandell, 1989). This approach to essay writing stresses the fact that the act of composing an essay does not display a linear progression from prewriting, through writing to rewriting. It involves forward and backward overlapping steps (Calkins, 1986: 18).

It has been stated above that one of the guiding principles a teacher must bear in mind as he undertakes the teaching of writing to young people, is to make them adequately involved and interested in the task. Harrison (1986: 61) has said that part of the problem associated with writing is that it can be "an oddly private, sometimes discomfortingly lonely task". The teaching of writing as a process goes a long way in tackling this problem by making essay writing a collaborative work between the teacher and the learner, by creating a relaxed ambience for learning, and by ensuring that the momentum is sustained.

At the primary level, it is advocated that writing process be held everyday. Many advocate that at the middle and upper primary levels, one hour be devoted daily or at least three times a week to writing practice (Calkins, 1986: 25). During the period for writing, the classroom assumes a special form designed to ensure that learners feel relaxed and focused. Tools that writers need for their work (pencils, erasers, sheets of paper, etc.) are supplied. During the writing sessions (or writing workshop) for junior primary classes, for example, the following may be supplied: (1) thin marker pens, crayons, regular pencils; (2) two daily folders, one for work-in-progress, notes on possible topics and other "raw materials" for writing, the other a cumulative folder for storing finished works. Provision is made for entering the title of each work and the date it was finished. Efforts should be made to provide these elements so that the task of writing is not interrupted by children moving up or down to borrow from others. Also, the conventional manner of arranging seats in the classroom should be modified during the period.

As soon as the writing activity commences, pupils are informed that they are going to become authors, that they would produce books (at the beginners' level, these are, in actual fact, stapled pieces of paper with their drawings and "description" underneath) and their good works would be published (which simply means that they would be placed on the school bulletin board). The teacher makes provision for writers' workshop so that the young authors might read and explain their works, seated on the author's chair (a special seat is improvised for this purpose).

The four-level model produced by Bauers and Nicholls (1986) and described above is based on the experiences of native speakers at the early primary school stage. The authors state that very brilliant children among them attain level four "within a year of starting school" (Bauers and Nicholls, 1986: 150). In Nigeria, "pre-writing activities" are meant to commence "as from the first term of the second year" (Federal Ministry of Education, 1983: 4). In applying the Bauers and Nicholls model to the English as a Second Language context in Nigeria, it seems reasonable to expect children to attain level four towards the end of the third term at the primary three level. This can help teachers to figure out the relationship between the levels in the model and our primary school levels.

At the first stage of the four-level Bauers and Nicholls model, the child is not yet capable of writing but he can draw on paper to represent his experiences. The teacher has to use these drawings as a basis for making him acquire the habit of composing. The children are asked to draw any persons or objects they like; they are informed that some pupils whose drawings tell a good story will be given the opportunity to talk to the class about their drawing. As the learners are engaged in their drawings, the teacher goes around and asks questions about the drawings produced, he selects a few pupils whose stories appear very creative and gives them, one at a time, the opportunity to sit on the author's chair and narrate the story or describe the events represented by the drawings, the pupils are taught to show great respect to the child on the author's chair. They are also encouraged to ask questions; these help the "author" to flesh out his presentation. Some of the skills specified for this level by the Federal Ministry of Education are stated as follows (Federal Ministry of Education, 1983: 8): "Oral Description and Representation of Reality:

- (i) Descriptions of objects, persons, events, actions, processes, relationships, in terms of

the child's observation and understanding of them.

- (ii) Understanding the oral descriptions of such objects, persons, events, actions, processes, etc. The exercise undertaken by children as described above is one of the ways through which the

Federal Ministry's objectives could be met. The writing practice the children undertake by the time they are able to compose sentences on their own benefits immensely from the oral practice.

One of the tasks of the teacher is to help the pupils to master the sub-skills in each of the stages of the process approach. The prewriting stage, for example, demands a mastery of the following:

- (1) Gaining understanding of the topic;
- (2) Setting limits to the subject in terms of length, purpose, audience, and writer's knowledge;
- (3) Finding something to say;
- (4) Making an informal outline;
- (5) Formulating a thesis; and
- (6) Making a formal outline (Kirszner and Mandeil, 1989: 3-21). As soon as the pupils are ready to put their thoughts on paper at the middle primary level, the teacher selects these sub-skills according to the needs and level of competence of his class. He teaches these topics, not as mere lectures, but in the context of actual practice by the pupils. Let us consider, for example, the sub-skill 'finding something to say'. This involves generating ideas that focus on a given topic. Some of the strategies for achieving this include the use of probing questions and brainstorming. The use of probing questions involves listing a set of questions which focus on the topic and arranging them so that the answers obtained will relate in a systematic manner to different aspects of the subject. A few of these questions are: What took place? When did it take place? Where did it take place? What did it cause? How is it different from other things? What are its component parts?

The teacher first of all gives pupils a mini-lesson on the use of probing questions. He presents the pupils with a list of these questions and practices with them how the technique could be employed in generating ideas on a topic such as 'My School'. Next, he gives them hints on the second stage of the process approach, that is, writing. He points out, for example, the tentative nature of good writing. It is not a one-shot matter. After the first draft, a good writer distances himself from his work, looks at the work as a reader who does not have access to the information that the writer has on the topic; he poses questions on areas which are not clear or where information is lacking. The focus is on the organization of information, not on the technical aspect of the writing (e.g. spelling, grammar), which belongs to the rewriting stage. The teacher reassures the pupils that he and the pupils would work collaboratively to produce good essays and that pupils' work-in-progress would be reviewed by the class in order to help pupils refine their work.

At this point, pupils are asked to write an essay on a topic such as 'My Family', using probing questions to generate ideas. The teacher goes around to see what the learners are doing. In order to give a general input into the pupils' work-in-progress, he asks one pupil to read his work while the whole class listens attentively in order to ask relevant questions. Let us imagine that the pupil's essay read as follows: I have three brothers. We live in Port Harcourt. My father works in Michelin Company. We live in a big house. I like the house. The whole class is given the opportunity to ask the author questions, or make comments on the essay-in-progress; they could come up with the following:

- (1) You have not told us about your mother;
- (2) How long has your father been working in Michelin?;
- (3) What does your mother do?;
- (4) Don't you have sisters?;
- (5) In what area of Port Harcourt do you live?;
- (6) Is the house you live in rented or owned by you?;
- (7) Do you have pets in the family?;
- (8) How many cars does your family have? These comments and questions help not only

the pupil whose work was scrutinized but also others in the class. They now try to flesh out their work on the basis of the suggestions. The teacher goes around to see what the pupils are doing and offers suggestions for improvement. At the initial stages of teaching writing, the teacher permits pupils to work in pairs or small groups because the focus is on collaborative teaching and learning, not on testing.

It has been indicated above that at the second stage of the process approach, that is, the writing stage, the writer releases the ideas he has gathered on a given topic by setting them down on paper and then finds ways to improve on his first draft. The pupils are taught different techniques of improving on their first draft. Some of these are:

1. Shortening a piece of work that is found to be unnecessarily long.
2. Expanding a piece of work that is so short that vital aspects of the subject are not given attention.
3. Examining the various sections (the title, the opening, the body of the work, the ending), deciding to what extent there is logical linkage among the parts, deciding whether to delete and replace unsatisfactory sections or to repair them.
4. Determining if the work is sufficiently oriented towards a functional purpose; if not, the writer reorients it to achieve such a purpose.
5. Predicting questions readers are likely to ask and revising the work to close the information gap identified.

The rewriting phase deals with those fine details of the work which do not need redrafting of the essay, for example, point of view and technical aspects such as spelling, punctuation and grammatical accuracy. These involve aspects of the child's second language competence which develop rather slowly and so the teacher must not rush to place unnecessary emphasis on them.

As the learners acquire competence in the rudiments of prewriting and writing, the writing sessions become more and more exciting. It has been noted above that pupils at the primary three level achieving results with their newly found ability to put their ideas on paper. The teacher has to invent multiple directions for the pupils to use this skill. For example, pupils are asked to brainstorm in groups and use the ideas generated to write independently on 'My Dog' or any other pet or domestic animal. The topics may relate to people and objects in the environment (farmer, politician, policeman, food-seller, church, mosque) or games or hobbies. The teacher spends a few minutes with each child in turn making suggestions for improvements in the child's work. It has been seen above that in the three-level categorization of children's treatment of self and others (Wilkinson, 1986), children tend to treat the third level (dispositional items involving people's temperament, character and personality) in a superficial manner. The teacher may make this a subject of a mini-lesson and try to encourage pupils to integrate the relevant elements into their work-in-progress as he interacts with them. He records where he stopped by the end of the lesson, so that he knows where to begin giving children individual attention the following period to ensure fairness (Ituen, 1998:23). At the end, the teacher selects a few pupils who produced the best essays to sit on the author's chair and present their essays to the whole class. It is useful for the teacher to heighten the importance of this event by making adequate arrangements for other teachers to be present. The essays presented are "published" on the school bulletin board and may be displayed for parents to see during a meeting of the Parent- Teacher Association.

Children's reading is also a good source of inspiration for them to write. At the beginning of the upper primary level when each child has written a good number of essays, the teacher presents a mini-lesson on 'Qualities of Good Writing'. The aim of such a lesson is to explore children's beliefs about the components of good writing and to enable them to consider ways of applying the principles of good writing to their work-in-progress. This type of lesson is important because children are exposed to experiences in their everyday life which may have adverse effects on their writing. Commenting on the negative effect of television on pupils' composition, for example, Calkins (1986: 16) has said: "perhaps because (children) believe a story will be interesting only if it contains two murders, a robbery, and a suicide, many young authors string together all the traumatic events they can recall from television shows". The children discuss in small groups and each child tells others the best book he has read and the good qualities he found in the book. The teacher moves around and records the views expressed in each group. Then all the children meet together and the teacher summarizes

the views expressed in the various groups and indicates the most significant qualities of a good writing. Children are expected to use these ideas to enrich their work-in-progress.

Similarly, at the junior level, after writing a number of “books” (that is, a number of essays written on shorter pieces of paper, stapled and held together in the child’s folder) each child is asked to tell others, in small groups, his best book and to justify the choice. The teacher goes around to

listen to the children’s views. The session ends with two or three authors sitting in turn, in the author’s chair, to show which of their works is the best and why. Each author responds to questions from peers.

A general technique to encourage children to write in the middle and upper classes of the primary school is to have a mini-lesson on journal keeping, set aside a specific journal time and ensure that every child keeps a personal journal everyday. An essential element in this strategy is that the teacher keeps a daily journal also. This serves as a model and motivator for the pupils. She writes in her own journal at the same time the pupils write in theirs. A first year teacher’s experience as reported by Rasinski and Padak (1996: 58) is instructive:

I show the [pupils] what I have written... I leave my journal open for [pupils] to look at it whenever they like. Everyday at least one or two [pupils] go up to the journal, examine it, read from it, or talk about how they are going to make their writing look like mine. Even though we often do some mini-lesson on some aspect of writing before we write, I think that my modeling is the best I can give my (pupils).

At the upper level of the primary school, pupils require a rich writing experience to sustain their interest in this activity. This is easily provided by making them interview people and write essays on a variety of topics. They can be asked to write the history of their school by interviewing former pupils and their teachers on the topic. Similarly, they can write the history of their communities by interviewing different people, both literate and illiterate. Each child takes down notes during the interview, then assembles this “raw material” in a logical manner to reflect what he has discovered; he now drafts and redrafts his work till a satisfactory version is obtained; finally he edits it for presentation to the class.

## **Conclusion**

Wilkinson (1986: 65) has suggested that the strategies which will be found suitable for enhancing writing development among learners can only be those which reflect adequately the nature of the writing task. In his view, writing development is similar to other crafts and requires “both a flow of activity and also a continuous appraisal of activity”. Besides, teachers can ensure that learners derive pleasure from the task by “encouraging a flow first, and by ensuring that appraisal is as anxiety-free as possible”. These requirements are adequately met by the process approach to essay writing. Primary school pupils need a non-threatening environment to practice writing skill, which is not easy, even to adults. Our approach to children’s writing should not be different from our attitude to infants’ attempts to use oral language. When children start to produce oral language, we are excited if they are able to emit an approximation to adult language which permits us to understand the message. In such a situation, no one thinks about errors in the child’s language. We focus on meaning. Similarly, if we are to help young children to master sound-symbol relationship and the organization of ideas, teachers must celebrate children’s little efforts in writing as big events.

## **Recommendations**

Arising from the discussion in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. Workshops and seminars should be mounted for teacher trainers and primary school teachers on the use of the process approach for the teaching of writing;
2. Teachers should be assisted by the school administration to create writing workshops needed for the process approach to writing. Some of the facilities can be shared by different classes working at different moments, to reduce cost;
3. Opportunities should be created on regular basis to permit pupils, as authors, to talk about their work;
4. The best essays should be displayed regularly on the school bulletin board;

5. Since reading is a good source of inspiration for writing, each primary school should have a library with relevant books for children; and
6. The Parent-Teacher Association, through the recommendation of the school authorities, should award prizes annually to the best pupil-authors.

## References

- Bauers, A.; and Nicholls, J. (1986). Early Writing. In Wilkinson, A. (ed) *The Writing of Writing*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 131-157.
- Bereiler, C. (1980). Development in Writing. In Gregg, L.A.V. and Steinberg, E.R. (eds.). *Cognitive Processes in Writing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Britton, J.N. (1975) What's the Use? In Wilkinson, A. *Language in Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Calkins, L.M. (1986). *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Carlin, E. (1986). Writing Development: Theory and Practice. In Wilkinson, A. *The Teaching of Writing*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 177-196.
- Federal Ministry of Education (1983). *National Curriculum for Primary English. Year III*. Lagos: Government Press.
- Ituen, S. A.U. (1998). The Process Model of Writing: From Theory to Practice. *Education and Training Journal*. Vol. 2, No. 2 16-24.
- Kirszner, L.G.; and Mandell, S.R. (1989). *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Ling, S. (1986). Responding to the Product in the Composing Process. *TESL Canada Journal*. Vol. 4, No. 1, 65-75.
- McCrimmon, J.M. (1974). *Writing with a Purpose, Fifth Edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Moffet, J. (1981). *Coming on Centre: English Education in Evolution*. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.
- Rosinski, T.; and Padak, N. (1996). *Effective Reading Strategies, Second Edition*. New Jersey: Merrill.
- Sommers, N. (1988). Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers. In Tate, G. and Corbett, E.P.J. (eds). *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 119-127.
- Stewart, D. (1988). Some History Lessons for the Composition Teacher. In Tate, G. and Corbett, E.P.J. (eds). *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 16-23.
- Sutton, C. (1981). *Communicating in the Classroom*. Kent: Plodder and Stoughton Educational.
- Wilkinson, A. (1986). I Write Therefore I Am. In Wilkinson, A. (ed) *The Writing of Writing*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.