DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 839 FL 027 694

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TITLE	EFL Writing: Product and Process.
PUB DATE	2002-02-00
NOTE	13p.; Originally published in 3 parts in "ELT News" 133, 134 & 135 (March, April, & May 2000).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.gabrielatos.com/EFLWriting.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; English (Second Language); Feedback; Higher Education; Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods; Vocabulary; *Writing Instruction ; *Writing Processes; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a cyclical framework of teaching procedures for a comprehensive English-as-a-Foreign Language writing program. It begins by providing examples of Greek students' writing and identifying common programs. Next, it outlines two aspects of good writing: product (language, layout and organization, relevance to the task, regard for the reader, and clarity) and process (task/title analysis, planning, writing the first draft, evaluating and improving the first draft, and language problems versus writing problems). Finally, it presents the four-part framework for teaching writing skills, which includes the following: awareness raising, support, practice, and feedback. It outlines the four components and presents specific procedures and materials for each stage of the cycle. The framework takes into account four ideas: what is taught is not necessarily what is learned; recycling is essential for learning; learners need to be actively involved in the learning process; and the more individualized the teaching, the more effective it is. (SM)

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EFL WRITING
Product and Process*

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INTRODUCTION

In order to be able to select and use appropriate procedures and materials, as well as assess their learners' needs and progress, teachers need to be clear regarding the desirable outcomes of a writing programme and the processes involved in good writing. In Part 1, I look at two typical examples of student writing and identify common problems. In Part 2, I outline the two aspects of good writing: *product* and *process*. In Part 3, I present a framework for teaching writing skills, as well as teaching procedures and materials.

PART 1. LOOKING BELOW THE SURFACE

In this section I will use two texts written by Greek EFL learners as a springboard for my discussion of the ingredients of successful writing. I would like to invite the readers to evaluate the texts and decide on their main merits and problems (keeping in mind the learners' level) before reading the commentary.

Example 1

The first text was written by a young teenager at low-intermediate level. The task was: *Write a story which includes the sentence "That was the moment when I realised I was in the wrong place".*

Original text

It was a lovely day of Sammer before five years and I went with my mother to Athens.

We began from [PLACENAME] in the morning. When we arrive we were going in my uncle's house.

We stayed there for an hour and my mother told me that we must have went for shopping before the shops closed. Then I told her that I wanted to stay there and when she bought everything she needs to came back. Next I went with my cousin to play basketball. My cousin saw his friends and told me to wait him.

I stayed there for a half of hour and I began to came back to the house but I couldn't find the house when I asked a man if he knew where my uncle's house was and he told that it was far from there. That was the moment when I realised I was in the wrong place.

Finaly I was lucky because I found my mother and we came back to my uncle's house.

I have used this text with more than 200 EFL teachers in different training situations. Each time, the vast majority of the participants thought that grammar and vocabulary were by far the main problem

* This article is based on a seminar I gave to OMIROS Language Schools teachers in Athens, Greece, on January 1998, as well as lecture notes for RSA/Cambridge Diploma & Certificate sessions I designed between 1994 and 1999. It was originally published in three parts in *ELT News* 133, 134 & 135 (March, April & May 2000). In this version (February 2002) I have revised the diagram depicting the cycle of procedures.

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areas, and that this student's writing would improve considerably with remedial grammar/vocabulary lessons.

The following is an 'improved' version of the learner's text, in which the main grammatical and lexical problems, as well as all spelling mistakes have been corrected. Please read it and answer the following questions:

1. Why did the writer and his mother go to Athens?
2. Why did they visit the writer's uncle?
3. Where did the writer's cousin see his friends?
4. Why did the cousin ask the writer to wait?
5. Where did the cousin ask the writer to wait?
6. How did the writer react?
7. Why did the writer decide to make his way back home alone?
8. How/where did he find his mother?
9. How did the writer feel about his experience?
10. Did he say anything to his cousin? If yes, how did the cousin respond? If not, why?

'Improved' version

It was a lovely summer day five years ago and I went with my mother to Athens.

We set out from [PLACENAME] in the morning. When we arrived we went to my uncle's house.

We stayed there for an hour and my mother told me that we should go shopping before the shops closed. Then I told her that I wanted to stay there and when she had bought everything she needed to come back. Next I went with my cousin to play basketball. My cousin saw his friends and asked me to wait for him.

I stayed there for half an hour and I began to go back to the house, but I couldn't find the house when I asked a man if he knew where my uncle's house was and he told me that it was far from there. That was the moment when I realised I was in the wrong place.

Finally I was lucky because I found my mother and we came back to my uncle's house.

None of the questions is answered in the text. The missing elements are the ones which make a story interesting and which readers expect to be told about. As I see it, the learner did not set out to write a story in the first place, but a specific number of words, loosely organised in sentences, on a given 'topic'. Of course, I am not suggesting that grammar, syntax and vocabulary are not essential to a well-written text. My point is that by over-concentrating on grammar and vocabulary we may ignore other more/equally important areas.

The 'improved' version makes it easier for us to identify those areas:

- The text is not a 'story', but merely a dry, fragmented account of an event, which holds no interest whatsoever for the reader.
- The given sentence is used awkwardly: being unable to find your way in an unfamiliar place is not the same as realising that you are *'in the wrong place'*.
- The learner includes unnecessary details which do not help story development, and may confuse the reader: *'... we stayed there for an hour'*, *'... when she had bought everything she needed to come back'*.
- Connectors are misused/overused: *'... **and** my mother told me ...'*, *'**Then** I told her that I wanted to stay there ...'*, *'**Next** I went with my cousin to play basketball'*, *'... I couldn't find the house **when** I asked a man if he knew ...'*.

  There are misguided attempts at producing complex sentences, which confuse the reader, even if they are grammatically/syntactically 'correct': *'I stayed there for half an hour and I began to go back*

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to the house, but I couldn't find the house when I asked a man if he knew where my uncle's house was and he told me that it was far from there'.

Example 2

The following text was written by a candidate for the First Certificate in English examination (source: UCLES, 1995: 42). Decide on the grade it should be awarded in terms of language (grammar, syntax, vocabulary and spelling).

> *Athens becomes more and more an attractive place for tourists. Although the city is big, loud and dirty, tourists can find a lot of romantic places to enjoy their vacations. For example the plaka, the historical city. There are a lot of bars and pubs and taverns in old houses which have been restored and they do have some atmosphere you hardly cannot describe.*
>
> *Exept of this there are of course the classic places like the Acropolis and the Agora, the old market-place. There attractions are for people who are interested in ancient history.*
>
> *Nevertheless Athens is also famous for good clothings. The clothes here are very often cheaper than in England, France or Germany.*
>
> *So Athens is a place for many tourists with different interests. And it is not so expensive as for instance Madrid or Paris.*

Now look at the task the learner was asked to perform and, again, decide on a grade.

> You recently started to work in local tourism and you had to visit a new tourist attraction (for example theatre museum or disco) in your area. You now must write a report for your boss.
>
> Write your **report** describing the attraction what it has to offer to tourists and commenting on its good and bad points.
>
> (UCLES, 1995: 32)

In terms of language, this seems to be a good piece of work, meriting a 'pass' at FCE level. Still, it is unsuccessful for the purpose it was supposed to have been written. The examiners awarded this text a 'fail' grade (E). Following are their comments:

> "There are some good structures and use of vocabulary but there is no attempt to simulate a report or to cover any of the specific points in the rubric. The target reader would learn nothing about a new attraction and may be confused by expressions incorrectly used."
>
> (UCLES, 1995: 42)

The two examples above show that language accuracy, although important, cannot alone result in effective writing. What is important in writing, both in EFL and in 'real life', is for the writer to achieve a goal (**'task achievement'** in EFL).

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PART 2. ELEMENTS OF GOOD WRITING

Elements Of Good Writing: Product

This section outlines the elements which characterise effective texts, and categorises them according to their nature. These elements are also the ones examiners look for when assessing the writing of candidates for a large number of EFL public examinations. As writing is a complex activity, there is some overlap between the categories.

The categories below stem from two approaches to writing (source: Johns, 1990): the **interactive** approach, according to which the writer is "involved in a dialogue with his or her audience" and which holds that "the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the writer" (Hinds, 1987 in Johns, 1990), and the **social constructionist** approach, according to which "the written product is considered a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience".

Language

- The ***spelling*** is correct and consistent (e.g. British vs. American spelling).
- There is accurate and appropriate use of ***grammar*** and ***syntax***.
- There is accurate and appropriate use, as well as a good range, of ***vocabulary***.

A note on appropriacy: We can distinguish two aspects of appropriacy. Firstly, the ***style*** (or *level of formality*). Secondly, the ***tone***, that is, the attitude communicated through the choice of language (e.g. polite, aggressive, sarcastic). Selection of an appropriate tone depends on the purpose of writing and the conventions of written communication in a particular context. For example, if the purpose of writing a letter of complaint is to ask for some sort of compensation, it may be rather ineffective to adopt either an aggressive or a defensive attitude – a letter written in a polite but firm tone would have much more chances of success.

A note on range: Although demonstrating command of a rich vocabulary is a definite plus in EFL writing, learners need to be cautious not to go to extremes in their attempt to avoid using the same word/expression again. Misguided use of synonyms/antonyms may communicate a different message from the one intended by the writer, as they may not be interchangeable in terms of denotation, connotation, collocation and level of formality (see Gairns & Redman, 1986: 13-43).

Layout & Organisation

- The ***layout*** is relevant to the text-type.
- The text has sections/paragraphs which have a ***clear focus*** (see also the note below).
- The ***method of organisation*** is clearly identifiable (e.g. similarity/contrast, for/against, pros/cons, cause/effect, before/after, linear/flashbacks). The organisation can also help the reader understand the content. For example, when the writer provides information in response to a letter by the reader (e.g. Part 1 of the FCE Writing Paper) it is helpful if the organisation of the response mirrors the one in the initial letter.
- There is clear ***linking*** between each section/paragraph/sentence and the previous and following one (see also the note below).
- The ***punctuation*** helps the reader understand the organisation.

A note on paragraphs: I have observed that it is common in ELT to present the paragraph as the unit of organisation in learners' writing, and sometimes provide guidelines on the number of paragraphs a given text should have. For example, learners are usually advised to divide an 'advantages/disadvantages' composition into four paragraphs (introduction, advantages, disadvantages, conclusion). I feel that such guidelines mislead rather than help learners. It would be more helpful (and more accurate) to guide learners to think in terms of **sections**, which may contain one or more paragraphs. For example, if a learner feels that there are more advantages than disadvantages in a given idea/plan, it would be wise to guide him/her to write a three-paragraph section for the advantages and a two-paragraph section for the disadvantages. Learners who are not

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aware of the distinction between 'section' and 'paragraph' may combine unrelated elements in one paragraph, or write over-long paragraphs. As a result, the organisation and clarity of the text may suffer.

A note on linking: It is also common practice to advise learners to use linking words/expressions (e.g. *furthermore*, *nevertheless*) to make explicit the connection between different parts of the text. Of course, linking devices can help clarity and organisation, but only if they are used properly. I think that the teaching of such devices should be supplemented with awareness-raising as to their suitability for different text types (e.g. level of formality), as well as the teaching of alternative ways of creating text unity (e.g. use of synonyms/antonyms and referring expressions). Learners should also be cautioned against overusing linking devices (e.g. starting almost every sentence with a linking word/expression).

Relevance to the task & regard for the reader

- There is appropriate ***coverage***. That is, the writer includes all the points required by the reader/task and avoids introducing irrelevant points.
- The level of ***explicitness*** is the one required by the reader/task. That is, the writer provides the exact amount of information required/needed by the reader. There are two sides to appropriate explicitness. Firstly, the writer only explains what he/she expects the reader doesn't know, as the opposite may well offend the reader. Secondly, the writer is careful to explain/clarify points which the reader may not be aware of (e.g. cultural-specific elements).
- The ***style*** is appropriate and is used consistently.
- The ***tone*** is consistent with the writer's purpose.

Clarity

- In a narrative (e.g. story), the reader needs to be clear regarding the ***sequence or events*** in time, the ***characters*** and their ***relationship***.
- In argumentative texts the writer's ***ideas*** should be ***stated clearly*** and supported by ***arguments*** and ***examples***.
- The ***link*** between events and/or arguments should be clear.

Elements Of Good Writing: Process

Here I outline the steps taken by effective EFL writers when confronted with a writing task. The categories below stem primarily from the **process approach** to writing (see Johns, 1990; Tribble, 1996; White & Arndt, 1991)

Task/title analysis

This involves reading the task/title and identifying the following:

- The ***writer's identity***, in case the learner is asked to assume a role (e.g. Part 1 of the FCE Writing Paper).
- The ***reader's identity***.
- The ***relationship*** between ***writer*** & ***reader*** and their ***relative status***, which will guide the choice of an appropriate ***style***.
- The ***purpose of writing*** the text (e.g. complaining, providing information) and the reader's ***purpose of reading*** it, which will help decisions about ***content***, ***coverage*** and ***tone***.
- The ***reader's*** relevant ***knowledge***, which will help the choice of the right ***level of explicitness***.
- The ***type of text*** that is to be written. In real life, writers decides on the text type according to their purpose and the conventions which apply to their specific context. In EFL, the current practice is to ask learners explicitly to produce a specific text type.

The following diagram shows the chain of information that the learner can obtain by analysing the task. The diagram also demonstrates how learners can receive clues/guidelines regarding the same

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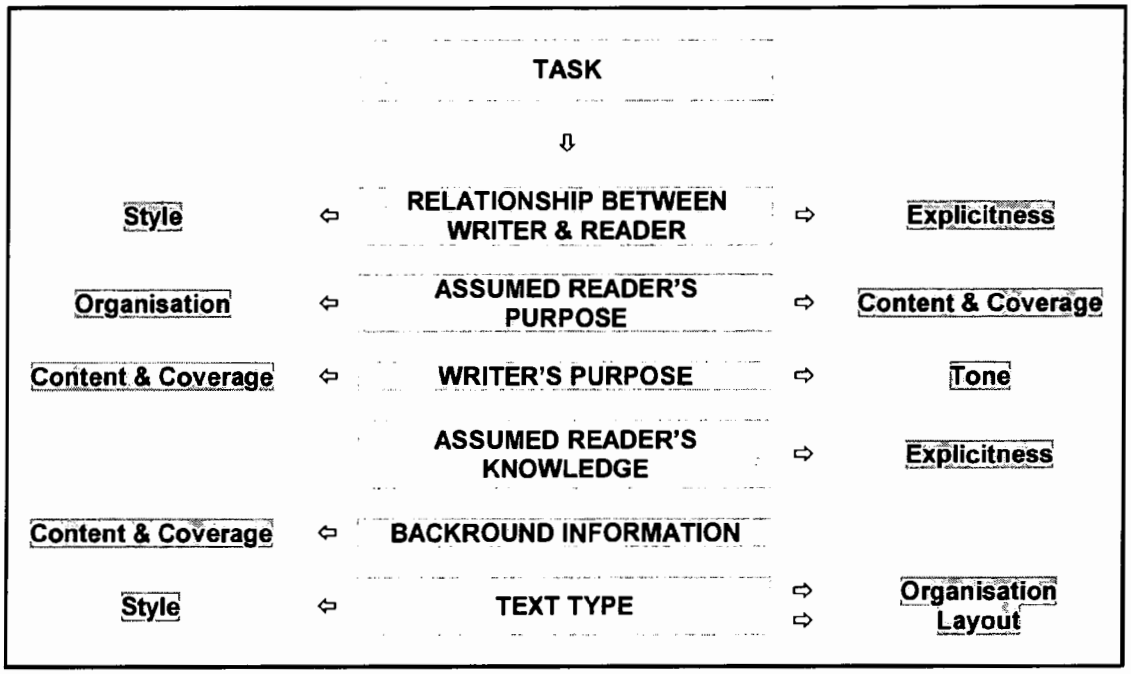
element of the written product from different pieces of information given in the task. This is to the learners' advantage, as they are more likely to identify the essential clues provided in the task.



Planning

This stage involves making decisions about the following:

Content and ***coverage*** (relevant ideas and/or required information).
Language (level of formality, style and attitude).
Layout (according to the type of text).
Type of organisation (e.g. similarity/contrast, for/against, pros/cons, cause/effect, before/after, linear account/flashbacks).
Sequence in which the events/arguments/ideas will be presented.

A note on planning: There are two basic alternatives for planning, both resulting in the same product (organised notes). They are presented in the following table. The most helpful approach is to present learners with both alternatives, as either one may be more suitable for different writing styles and/or tasks.

Take notes as you are brainstorming	→	Organise the notes in sections and/or paragraphs
Decide on the number and content of sections and/or paragraphs	→	Take notes relevant to each section and/or paragraph

Writing the first draft

- ***Expanding*** on the notes. Depending on how comprehensive the notes are, this may mean that the writer either has only to turn the organised notes into sentences, or has to add more elements (e.g. facts, ideas, arguments, examples).
- ***Re-organising***, if necessary. That is, adding, removing, re-arranging, splitting or combining sections/paragraphs.
- ***Linking*** the different elements so that the text is clear for the reader.

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Evaluating and improving the first draft

- Reading for ***global impression***. That is, the writer places him/herself in the position of the reader and decides if the text is effective overall.
- Reading for ***specific points*** (relevance to task, coverage, explicitness, organisation, layout, language) and making any necessary alterations.
- Writing ***improved/final draft***.

Language problems vs. Writing problems

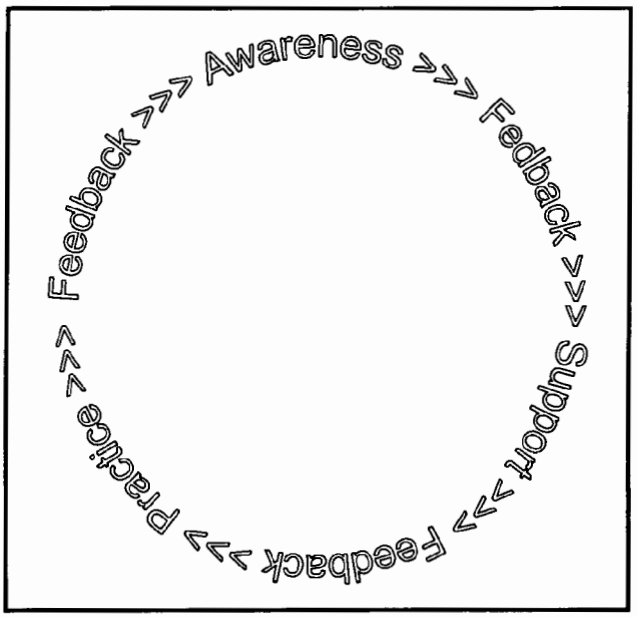
In order to help EFL learners become more effective writers, we need to make a crucial distinction between language accuracy and writing skills. That is, a learner may be able to write sentences which are satisfactory for his/her level in terms of grammar, syntax and vocabulary and still be unable to produce an effective text (see previous issue for an example). Of course, in most cases learners will have problems in both areas (language and writing skills). Therefore, it is crucial for us to be able to look beneath the layer of language problems to discover writing problems.

This leads us to another important distinction, the one between grammar/vocabulary development and writing skills development. We need to remember that language input/practice alone cannot result in the development of writing skills. Special 'writing' lessons are necessary, in which learners are guided to become aware of all the elements of good writing, supported with information & examples, provided with opportunities for practice, and given focused feedback on their performance. Of course, we can also plan lessons which integrate work on language with work on writing skills. In such cases, it is important for us to be clear about the aims/focus of different stages in the lesson.

PART 3. A TEACHING FRAMEWORK

Writing Skills Development Cycle

The procedures I will propose for a writing skills programme can be seen to form a cycle. Such a view of learning procedures has been proposed by a number of writers (e.g. Altrichter et. al., 1993; Kolb, 1984) and was modified for the teaching of speaking skills in Gabrielatos (1993). The procedures involved and their sequence are presented in the following diagram.



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This framework explicitly takes into account the following:

- What is taught is not necessarily what is learned.
- Recycling is essential for learning.
- Learners need to be involved actively in the learning process.
- The more individualised the teaching, the more effective it is.

This is why the 'Feedback' stage is linked directly to (i.e. informs) all other stages. In other words, each stage takes into account the needs of the specific group of learners. Another merit of the cycle is that there is no fixed starting point; that is, a lesson can start at any stage. For example, a teacher starting lessons with a new group of learners can set a writing task and begin the first cycle with feedback on the writing product.

The following section outlines the components of this teaching cycle, as well as specific procedures and materials for each stage of the cycle. Teachers can use the procedures flexibly to determine their objectives and scope according to the needs of their learners.

Awareness-raising

In this stage learners are guided to discover/identify specific elements of good writing (see part 2, previous issue) and features of different text types. In a writing programme, the awareness-raising stage always involves reading. In fact, the development of reading skills is indispensable for the development of writing skills. The procedures marked by an asterisk (*) below can also be used for the development of reading skills. After learners have been familiarised with awareness-raising procedures, teachers can set awareness-raising tasks as homework. Such practice can free valuable classroom time for 'Support' and 'Feedback' procedures.

Awareness-Raising Procedures

- Analysing a text regarding one or more elements of good writing.
- Analysing a poorly formulated text in order to identify problems and propose remedies and reformulations.
- Analysing (excerpts from) learner texts for merits & shortcomings.
- Comparing two texts in terms of style/register.*
- Ordering jumbled sentences to create a paragraph/text.*
- Ordering jumbled paragraphs to create a text.*
- Inserting additional or missing information into a text (*linking & signposting expressions, sentences, paragraphs*).*
- Dividing a text into sections/paragraphs. *

Support

In this stage learners are helped to clarify/consolidate the points raised and discussed during the Awareness-raising stage, and/or guided in their efforts to produce a text. Support procedures can be of three different types according to the learners' needs. Firstly, learners may be given explicit and generalisable information and guidelines, as well as illustrative examples, regarding the organisation, layout and style of specific text-types. Secondly, the teacher may provide help regarding the specific task at hand. For example, learners can be guided to identify the intended reader, the purpose of writing and the points to be covered, as well as helped to generate ideas regarding organisation, vocabulary and grammar. Thirdly, the teacher may elicit and/or pre-teach one or more of the following: relevant vocabulary, grammar, background information.

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Support Procedures

- Grammar input/revision & exercises.
- Elicitation and/or input of relevant vocabulary.
- Elicitation and/or input regarding relevant ideas / items of content.
- Elicitation and/or input regarding elements of good writing.
- Planning guidelines (*content, layout, organisation, style*).

Practice

The Practice stage offers students the chance to use and experiment with the features of good writing discussed in the 'awareness' stage. In turn, the product of the Practice stage will be used in the Feedback stage. Practice procedures can be categorised according to their **focus** and the amount of **control**. In terms of focus, practice can be of two types, ***focused*** and ***global*** (see Cook, 1989). In *focused* practice learners concentrate on one element of writing. In *global* practice learners are given a writing task to achieve. In terms of control, practice can be ***controlled*** or ***free***. In *controlled* practice the aim is the development of accuracy. Acceptable responses are pre-determined, or there are limitations as to the content of the text to be written. In *free* practice the aim is effective communication through writing (i.e. achievement of a writing task), and the range of acceptable responses is much greater. The teacher can choose the focus of activities and manipulate the amount of control depending on the learners' needs. For example, the teacher may give learners a writing task (global practice), but also impose some control over the content by asking them to use a specified number of words/expressions or structures in the text.

Some useful hints

- After focused activities give learners the opportunity to re-integrate the features practised in a global activity.
- Choose motivating topics, relevant to the learners' age.
- Choose realistic & motivating tasks.
- In global practice always give learners a reason for writing, as well other information about the context (intended reader, writer's identity, text type, content & coverage).

Focused Practice Procedures

- Ordering jumbled sentences to create a paragraph/text.
- Taking & organising notes.
- Dividing a text into sections/paragraphs.
- Combining simple sentences to make complex ones.
- Ordering jumbled paragraphs to create a text.
- Inserting additional or missing information into a text (linking & signposting expressions, sentences, paragraphs).
- Guided planning (content, layout, organisation, style).

Global Practice Procedures

- Creating a text according to a model.
- Creating a text from prompts (title, task, text, first/last sentence, key words/expressions, visuals, outline, tables etc.)
- Re-writing a text following specific guidelines (corrections, code, comments etc.).

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Feedback

It seems that Feedback is the part of a writing programme which is either underused or misunderstood. Feedback need not be limited to the overt correction of errors and the provision of comments and/or grades by the teacher. Feedback can (and should) be a learning experience, which provides the link between consecutive writing lessons. During feedback, learners are invited to identify the merits and shortcomings of their writing performance, understand the reasons for these shortcomings and discuss possible improvements. When learners have become familiar with feedback procedures, feedback activities can also be set as homework.

In order to make optimal use of the Feedback stage, teachers need to be aware of three basic aspects of feedback procedures. These aspects can be seen as answers to the following three questions:

- *Who provides comments/corrections?*
- *What is the focus of feedback?*
- *How is feedback given?*

Who provides comments/ corrections?

It doesn't necessarily have to be the teacher. Actually, involving learners actively in feedback is a requirement of the 'cycle'. Through trying to pinpoint merits and shortcomings in their own or peers' written texts and propose improvements, the learners' awareness of the elements of good writing develops, and another learning cycle is set in motion.

Alternative evaluators

- The teacher.
- The teacher in collaboration with a learner or group of learners.
- Other learners (peer correction). Learners may work individually, in pairs/groups, or as a class.
- The learner him/herself (self-correction).

What is the focus of feedback?

It is advisable that feedback focus on a limited number of elements. Giving learners feedback on a large number of elements can only confuse them. What is more, limiting feedback to specific elements of writing is consistent with the view of feedback as part of the learning cycle.

Alternative areas of focus

- Spelling.
- Grammar (accuracy and appropriacy).
- Vocabulary (accuracy and appropriacy).
- Natural use of language.
- Linking and signposting expressions.
- Layout.
- Organisation.
- Clarity of expression.
- Regard for reader (e.g. level of explicitness).
- The area(s) which the previous lesson(s) focused on.
- Only what affects clarity / task achievement.

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How is feedback given?

Feedback procedures cannot be used irrespective of the problem area. There are procedures which are more suitable for feedback on vocabulary and grammar mistakes, and others which are more effective for the treatment of problems in other areas (e.g. style, organisation, coverage, relevance). The feedback procedures outlined below have been adapted from Tribble (1996) and White & Arndt (1991).

Feedback on vocabulary & grammar

The techniques below are given in order of increasing difficulty for the learner, in that they provide a decreasing amount of support.

Correct error directly (i.e. cross out incorrect part and write correct version).
Underline, indicate type and refer learners to a reference book (e.g. grammar book, or grammar section in the coursebook).
Underline the error and indicate the type on the margin.
Underline the error.
Indicate the type of error(s) on the margin. The teacher needs to familiarise learners with the coding system that will be used.
Indicate the number of errors in each line on the margin.

Feedback on other areas

- Comments and guidance questions on the margin and/or at the end of the text.
- Teacher-learner conference: teacher and learner/pair/group collaborate as co-writers to write and/or improve specific parts of a text. Conference can take part either while learners write a text in class or after its completion.
- Reformulation: the teacher or learner (in the case of peer-correction) checks what a learner wants to express in a problematic part of the text and rewrites it. This technique can also take place during conferencing.
- Self/peer correction using a checklist: the teacher formulates a checklist based on the elements of good writing and the learners (individually, in pairs/groups, or as a class) evaluate a text using the checklist and suggest improvements. This technique is particularly suited to exam-prep classes, as it trains the learners to evaluate and improve their own writing.
- The teacher collects problematic excerpts on a handout or overhead transparency. Learners in pairs/groups or as a class (with the teacher's guidance) identify problems and suggest improvements.
- The teacher adopts the role of the intended reader and reacts to the text in a realistic way (e.g. by 'sending' a short reply, or 'calling' the writer.

CONCLUSION

Writing is a complex skill, and its development involves much more than the accurate use of grammar and a good range of vocabulary. A comprehensive EFL Writing programme requires the systematic treatment of a large number of interrelated elements. In this article I presented a cyclical framework of teaching procedures comprising four stages: awareness-raising, support, practice and feedback.

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Title: EFL Writing: Product and Process	
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Corporate Source:	Publication Date: Published March, April and May 2000. Revised version February 2002.

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