

**A PROCESS APPROACH TO TEACHING  
ACADEMIC WRITING**

**Ana MUNTEAN,**

Alecu Russo Balti State University,  
Republic of Moldova  
[anamunt@gamil.com](mailto:anamunt@gamil.com)

**Abstract:** The article reports on the personal experience of the author in designing an Academic Writing course for undergraduate students based on the process approach to teaching. Instead of concentrating on students' final written product and making critical comments on it, teachers can help students write better by aiding them in the actual process of writing, by finding the source of their problems in creating good written texts and enabling them to overcome those difficulties. The article provides recommendations on how to integrate a process-based approach to teaching writing.

**Keywords:** academic writing, process approach, active learning, student-centered learning setting.

Though all the skills are important for language learning, the writing skill is probably the most needed in academic and professional communities. It constitutes an important means of communication to express ideas, arguments, and points of view. Therefore, improving the quality of students' writing is not merely a goal of any Foreign Language Program. Quality writing has become a crucial requisite to facilitate our graduates' access to the globalized and competitive labour market.

Writing in English has always been a challenge in the EFL classroom. Nunan D. (1999) claims that writing is 'probably the most difficult thing to do in language' as it is not a spontaneous skill or a skill that can be acquired easily (Nunan, 271). The expert points out that writing is a 'complex, cognitive process that requires sustained intellectual effort over a considerable period of time' (Nunan, 273).

Academic writing is different from general writing and its challenges cause many misunderstandings among students. Academic writing is writing which communicates ideas, information and research to

members of an academic community. It focuses on evidence-based arguments and logical reasoning to guide a reader's understanding of a subject. Therefore, it requires discipline and precision. As student academic writing is mainly used as a form of assessment at university, students need academic writing skills to demonstrate their understanding of University course content by producing a well-structured written text based on a central *thesis*, which is the main idea the student intends to communicate.

Developing academic writing skills seems to be a great challenge for EFL students. They find academic writing quite painful as it requires following a set of established criteria, such as structure, evidence, critical thinking, accuracy, objectivity, and formality. Students have to make a shift from the type of writing they produced at school to a different type of writing. They have to learn to write with a focus and purpose, formulate a thesis statement, structure content to support thesis, integrate academic sources using paraphrasing and summarizing. All these pertain to higher order thinking skills and require active student participation in learning.

Fortunately, the students who enroll in Foreign Language Programs at Alecu Russo Balti State University may take an Academic Writing course since 2016. The change in the Program has been made to align Curricula to the standards of the contemporary educational world and train specialists who will be able to communicate effectively both orally and in writing.

My experience of teaching academic writing started in 2012, when I got an Erasmus Exchange Staff mobility scholarship and had a unique chance to teach Italian students at the University of Lecce. It was an exceptional experience and it was then that I began to design a process-focused Academic Writing course.

Back at home, I continued to carry research and implement the same process approach to teaching Academic Writing. My choice has been determined by the belief that writing should be used not only as a form of assessment but also as a learning tool. I also advocate for the value of formative assessment, and the process approach to writing offers

more opportunities to offer positive and constructive feedback that contributes to authentic learning.

As mentioned above, in the EFL classroom, the teaching and learning of writing has always been a tough issue among both teachers and students. Studies that have been conducted in this area can be categorized according to three major theoretical approaches. Three main approaches have been recognized: the traditional product oriented approach, the process oriented approach and the genre oriented approach to teaching and learning of writing. The Product Approach dominated the teaching of writing until the 1980s. This approach focuses on grammatical accuracy, which was in line with the predominant Audiolingual or the Grammar Translation teaching methods of the time. With the rise of the Communicative Approach in TEFL there have been promoted a different approach to teaching writing as well.

The process approach to teaching writing is not a new issue. Donald M. Murray, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and educator, wrote his short but outstanding article, “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product,” in 1972. In his article, which may be viewed as a brief manifesto on teaching writing, he criticizes writing instructors’ tendency to view student writing as “literature”, that is final product or ‘masterpiece’ and to focus our attention on this “product” (the finished essay) while grading.

Murray explains why writing is an ongoing process:

*What is the process we [writing instructors] should teach? It is the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world. Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness. (4)*

Similarly, Brown (2001, p. 336) states that writing is a thinking process, a writer produces a final written product based on their thinking after the writer goes through the thinking process.

Liz Hamp-Lyons acknowledges that process-centered approach promotes students' involvement and increases student' motivation, which is a significant gain.

“Few teachers who have made the conversion in their teaching from a product-centered approach to a process-centered one have failed to see its superiority in terms of student involvement and interaction and therefore of motivation. Similarly, the treatment of error and the approaches to feedback are appealing to teachers and learners alike, who have been swimming (or drowning) in a sea of red ink for years”. (Liz Hamp-Lyons, 790)

The process approach shifts the focus from WHAT to write towards HOW to write. It is meant to transform students in active writers and help them discover their creative potential as writers. It requires teachers to invest much time and learn to provide constructive feedback to every individual student. In process writing, the teacher is not the one who sets students a writing topic and receives the finished product for correction and grading. He/She is the one who participates with the students in the writing process, making interventions, clarifying, helping with ideas and language. In addition, this approach creates a student-centered learning setting and empowers students by encouraging them to understand and enhance their writing strategies and techniques.

With all the benefits that the process approach to teaching academic writing may seem to yield, we should be aware of our roles as instructors to guide our students through this process. The teacher should give careful instruction and help students by providing the necessary learning strategies. Going through every stage of the writing process, the students should have a clear understanding of its purpose and how they can improve their writing skills by pausing at every stage of the process.

It is not enough to tell the students that during the *invention* stage they should take time to brainstorm and generate ideas for their writing. Students should clearly understand the purpose of this stage, and namely that during this stage they should determine the communicative

purpose of their writing and for this they need to make sure that they understand their writing assignment. So, the teacher may draw students' attention to the key verb in their assignment – *define, describe, explain, compare, argue*, which, in fact, announces the task. In addition, teachers should remind students to look at the rubrics to see the assessment criteria set by the teacher. Teachers should also provide students with useful strategies for brainstorming, such as freewriting, listing ideas, generating questions, clustering, mapping, creating an outline. These are good strategies for group activities as well as individual work.

During the *drafting* stage, students should take time to develop the ideas they formulated during the Invention stage and use support to add credibility to their ideas. At this stage, students should be reminded that they are to follow an outline. Visually, it may be represented as follows:

**Topic sentence / Thesis**

***a. Main idea 1***

- Supporting detail 1
- Supporting detail 2

***b. Main idea 2***

- Supporting detail 1
- Supporting detail 2

The revising stage is set for students to look at the global issues, that is the meaning, the content and the organization of their writing. Students often neglect this stage mainly because they don't quite understand what they should review. Therefore, teachers should prepare a checklist to direct students to concrete points, such as (1) verify if the topic sentences and supporting ideas connect to the announced thesis statement, delete / re-write sentences that do not support the thesis; (2) verify if the support is adequate: add more specific details, delete ideas that are repeated; (3) verify if the language is precise and formal, replace words like *good, bad, nice* with more specific vocabulary, check the syntax of sentences, paraphrase to make

the meaning clearer; (4) Check for source use. Students should clearly understand the difference between the reviewing stage and the editing stage, that is about proofreading for spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Student-centered learning implies that the role of the teacher changes and he/she should act as facilitator, coach, advisor. In a process approach to teaching academic writing, teachers may easily adopt the role of facilitators by developing clear prompts for writing assignments. Every prompt should remind the students about all the stages of the writing process. In addition, it should be made clear to students that their final grade will include their work on various stages of the process. For example, the student's work in the Planning stage, when he/she generates ideas and creates an outline, may be assessed with 15% from the final grade, the first draft may count 35% and the final draft – 50%. In such a way, the students will be encouraged to reflect on their writing by reviewing and improving it, following the teacher's feedback. The teachers, in their turn, will have clear evidence of the students' involvement in writing and will be able to prevent attempts of plagiarism. The evaluation criteria should be clearly described in the prompt, so that the students understand the teacher's policy. An example of such description may be:

### **Evaluation criteria**

Reminder: The average mark for this assignment is made of: (1) your outline and drafting thesis during the planning stage (15%), (2) your first draft version (35%) and the final draft (50%). The following rubrics will be applied to assess your first and final drafts.

Obviously, adopting a process approach to teaching writing requires teachers to review their teaching philosophy and accept the idea it requires a significant investment of class time to be successful. We should understand there is no perfect method or approach in teaching and very often we need to combine or adjust methods to make them work in our educational settings. In addition, some students may be resilient to following all the stages and rewriting several drafts. However, a survey of undergraduate students, who took the course of Academic Writing in the autumn term of 2022, highlights how this

process-based approach helped them get a new perspective on writing and it reports what helped them get better learning outcomes:

“Brainstorming helps in writing”. (S9)

“Before the course, I didn’t know that brainstorming can make the task easier”. (S16)

“The most valuable thing I took from Academic Writing is the ability to think differently and try to get the reader interested”. (S4)

“I learned how to share my thoughts for people to understand me”. (S5)

Thus, having observed several generations of students taking the course, I may now make a claim that this approach definitely helps them better understand the writing process as well as improve the quality of their writing. Students often treat writing as a boring task they have to do to indulge their teachers. However, I am inclined to believe that when they are engaged in writing as process, in which they all work, step by step, to create something of their own, very individual and purposeful, their attitude towards writing changes.

## References

Brown, D. (2001) *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*, Second Edition. New York: Pearson Education

Nunan, D. (1999) *Second Language Teaching & Learning*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle

Murray, Donald. (1982). "Learning by Teaching". Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching. Reprinted from *The Leaflet* (November 1972): 11-14. Boynton/Cook Publishers

Hamp-Lyons, L. (1986). Two Commentaries on Daniel M. Horowitz’s “Process, Not Product: Less Than Meets the Eye”. *No New Lamps for Old Yet, Please. TESOL Quarterly*, 20(4), 790–796. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586533>