

Introducing Multiple-Draft Assignments in the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

The paper demonstrates the results of a study involving second-year students of English Philology at The State Higher Vocational School in Nysa, Poland. In their writing class, students accustomed to the product-oriented writing instruction were introduced to the process approach by completing a cycle of three multiple-draft assignments. Students' drafts in all three assignments are analysed to determine how their papers changed in quality over time and if the feedback the students received from one another contributed to possible improvement. The drafts of one student are presented to show the changes typical of the majority of participants. Although the assignments did not contribute to significant improvement in the students' composing skills, the new approach seems promising if certain modifications are introduced.

Although an emphasis on the composing process has been recommended in theories of ESL/EFL writing pedagogy since the 1970s (e.g., McNamara, 1973; Pumphrey, 1973; Zamel, 1982; Zamel, 1983; Hayes and Flower, 1986; Raimes, 1991; Bridwell-Bowles, 1991), English language writing instruction in Poland is still largely product-oriented, which means that teachers provide their students with the composition topics and require them to write papers without showing them how to deal with the writing tasks. The teachers later evaluate the papers mainly as regards grammatical correctness and return the compositions with little or no comments concerning ideas for revision. As such, writing in English is treated more like grammar practice and does not really help students cope with the difficulties that appear, for example, while gathering ideas or organising the papers. Student writers either

try to emulate model compositions they are presented with or they use their experience of writing in Polish. In both cases, they rarely better their composition skills because imitating papers does not prepare students to solve the problems that arise throughout the writing process, and neither does their Polish writing experience serve as a reliable basis. While writing in Polish, the students are not expected to focus on the thesis statements and clear presentation of ideas. They are encouraged to write lengthy compositions and simply commit their thoughts on paper without attending much to clarity. Since the 1990s, though, more and more academic writing teachers have become aware of the importance of the process approach and have supported their students at different stages of their composing (Reichelt 2005).

As a novice teacher of writing, I myself was not acquainted with the principles of the process approach. In my writing class, I mainly required my first and second year students of English Philology to analyze model compositions, do course book exercises, and finally write papers on given topics. Among the papers the students composed, there were mainly descriptive and discursive essays as well as narratives. I had intended my students to learn about the proper organisation of different types of compositions, the importance of a clear thesis statement and the appropriate development of the main ideas in their papers. I also meant to prepare the students for writing a diploma paper in the third year of their studies. Despite the fact that the majority of students managed to remember the essential information, they were unable to use this knowledge in practice and, consequently, produced poor quality papers that lacked proper thesis statements, logical choice and order of arguments. As a result, I decided to reconsider my tutoring techniques to look for other ways of effective teaching.

I reorganised my classes according to the suggestions put forward by the proponents of the process approach, and in four groups of second-year students of English Philology, instead of focusing on course book model compositions and requesting single-draft papers, I introduced multiple-draft assignments comprising pre-writing discussions and peer response exercises aimed at promoting global revision (Bartlett, 1982; Zhu 1995; Zalewski, 2001; Min, 2006). I intended to help my students deal with the problems that had emerged in their texts throughout the first year of their English Philology studies. The approach appeared promising in view of the stages the assignments included because all the activities enabled the students to concentrate on the shortcomings of their texts. Together with introducing the new approach, I commenced an ethnographic research (North, 1987) into the students' composing skill and their attitudes to the new process-oriented writing classroom.

I carried out three assignments in the winter semester of the students' second year of English Philology. In comparison with the product-oriented activities, I had expected that such multiple-draft assignments would be more beneficial for my students owing to the fact that the students were not left unassisted while preparing their texts. Instead of being required to demonstrate how they utilize the knowledge about writing, the students were provided with the «procedural support

throughout the process» (Zalewski, 2001, p. 36) of composing in the form of instructions prepared by the teacher. In addition, they could learn how to write effectively thanks to the feedback they had received from their classmates. In other words, instead of emulating model compositions to write one draft weekly, they were allowed to improve their texts over a longer period and submit polished final drafts for assessment. In the assignments, I had also intended to address the widely discussed problem concerning the inability of global revision observed among novice writers (e.g., Bartlett, 1982, Wallace and Hayes, 1991). By providing the students with the peer response sheets that included the questions they were supposed to answer about their classmates' draft, I had expected each student to obtain comments helping them to revise their first draft globally. This meant focusing, first and foremost, on such aspects as audience, purpose, and the overall organization of the text rather than on surface level problems such as words and spelling that inexperienced writers usually attend to at the initial stages of their composing (Wallace and Hayes, 1991). To provide the oral feedback in Assignments 2 and 3, the students were to decide by themselves what else needed to be improved in their classmates' papers, taking into account the grammatical and technical problems, as well.

Data analysis

Since I had expected gradual improvement in my students' writing, I had imagined that the peer response and the final draft of Assignment 1 would be rather inefficient and that some improvement would appear in Assignment 2. In Assignment 3, I had counted on good-quality final drafts resulting from the constructive and exhaustive peer response. To determine whether the multiple-draft assignments turned out more conducive to the development of my students' composing skills, I analyzed all the drafts of the three assignments as well as the peer response sheets and post-assignment questionnaires. I examined all the drafts qualitatively by applying a «multiple-trait» approach (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; cited in Min, 2006, p. 125) to concentrate on the most significant aspects in students' papers. In successive versions, I sought improvements on macro features such as idea development, sufficiency, and organization of information, as signs of enhanced quality (Min, 2006, p.125). Those features seemed the most relevant to

Surface Changes	Text-Based Changes	
	Microstructure Changes	Macrostructure Changes
Additions (reviser adds information)	Additions	Additions
Deletions (reviser deletes information)	Deletions	Deletions
Substitutions (reviser substitutes information)	Substitutions	Substitutions
Permutations (reviser rephrases information)	Permutations	Permutations
Distributions (reviser re-writes same information in larger chunks)	Distributions	Distributions
Consolidations (reviser puts separate information together)	Consolidations	Consolidations
Reorderings (reviser moves information)	Reorderings	Reorderings

the evaluation of the progress in my students' writing because the semester seemed a period too short for the students to improve their writing skills as regards all aspects. Thus, concerning the idea development, in Assignment 1 I focused on whether the students had chosen a realistic problem, addressed it to the proper audience and suggested solutions acceptable to both sides. In Assignment 2, I concentrated on the ability to write a statement explicitly presenting the problem of cheating, specifying types of cheating and possible penalties. In Assignment 3, I studied how the students managed to construct their own topic concerning body language, and how they dealt with developing the thesis statement and presenting their arguments to the selected audience. Regarding sufficiency and the organization of information, I searched for the relevant information included in students' drafts and the logical presentation of ideas.

The analysis of all the papers revealed that only 7 % of 54 students managed to improve the drafts significantly, and the majority (76 %) either improved their papers insignificantly, did not improve them at all, or even produced final drafts of worse quality (17 %). What appeared typical in the papers was that the first drafts in Assignment 1 were usually revised only locally, which was the result of not very critical and relevant peer feedback. More global changes were observed in Assignments 2 and 3. To demonstrate the results of the analysis of the successive drafts, I will restrict myself to presenting the texts of one student only, as her revisions show changes typical of the majority of students (76%). I will concentrate on Agata's successive drafts of Assignments 1 and 3, and

relate the student's revisions to the peer feedback she received.

Case study – The analysis of Agata's drafts

To compare the two drafts in Assignment 1 and the three drafts in Assignment 3, the qualitative and quantitative analyses of revisions were carried out according to Min (2006). Below, both types of the analysis are described and further, the results concerning Agata's drafts are shown.

The qualitative analysis, as discussed above, concerned such features as idea development, sufficiency, and the organization of information. The quantitative analysis entailed studying the revisions as regards their type, size, and function and was to reveal the degree of the student's global revision. The quantitative analysis concerning the type of revision was based on the following taxonomy adopted from Min (2006, p. 126): The size of revision refers to whether the revision concerns punctuation, word, phrase, clause, sentence, or paragraph. Among the functions of revision, there can be distinguished: grammatical (when the text is grammatically enhanced) and cosmetic (when the text looks better); other functions involve improving the text on cohesion and coherence, removing unnecessary expressions or explicating equivocal statements (Min, 2006).

Below, I will first discuss the two drafts in Assignment 1, and later, I will study the three drafts in Assignment 3 using qualitative and quantitative analyses. I will also show how the revision is influenced by the peer response exercise. Finally, I will draw conclusions based on the results.

Assignment 1

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis of the two drafts in Assignment 1 shows that there are actually no major differences between them in terms of idea development, sufficiency, and organization of information. Both are written as formal letters addressed to the director of the library. First, there is the problem of the insufficient number of books in the school library signalled and then the problem is described in a broader perspective. Next, solutions are presented and the conclusion follows. As discussed below, it is the conclusion in the final draft that makes this last version more convincing to the audience.

Quantitative analysis

Although qualitatively the final draft seems insignificantly better than the first one, quantitative analysis revealed a number of changes introduced (36 altogether). The majority of them are surface changes (35) in the form of additions, permutations, and substitutions appearing mainly at the level of words and clauses. The modifications serve the grammatical, cosmetic and explicating functions. There is one change at the microstructure level in the form of an added sentence that makes the information in the text more explicit. The fact that the changes that appear in the second draft do not modify the text globally may be the result of not very critical peer response. The conclusion in both drafts can provide an illustration (The excerpts from the students' drafts are cited unchanged):

Assignment 1

Agata's first draft

I hope that my arguments and possible advantages of facilitating students with all assigned materials will be carefully considered and convincing enough to take up any steps to improve current situation.

Peer Response Exercise:

Question 5: Does the conclusion provide a definite sense of closure? Has the writer achieved his or her purpose and concluded the paper rather than merely stopped or given up?

Joanna: ... There is some kind of summing-up of the paper, but maybe there should be more

summing-up connected with her argument and solution.

Response to Peer Response:

Agata: ...She says also that my summing-up could be more connected with my arguments and the solution. I have decided that I will add some more information to sum up my letter.

Agata's second draft:

I hope that my arguments and possible advantages of supplying the school library with all materials necessary for studying will be carefully considered and convincing enough to take up any steps in order to improve current situation. Students who can copy assigned books could spend more time on learning and it would be profitable both for students and our school whose prestige might increase then.

The added sentence may be regarded as the only microstructure modification since it does not change the summary of the text and only repeats the information from the previous part of the letter. The sentence slightly improves the conclusion making it more convincing to the audience. This example also shows that Agata accepts the peer's opinion and tries to improve the text. Even if the change is not very successful, and the peer's comments are scarce and not very specific, the writer tries to benefit from the comments and adjust her paper accordingly. It can be inferred that if the peer had given more relevant comments, the writer would have significantly improved her paper.

On the whole, in Assignment 1, the student becomes acquainted with the new approach, and the results are not really satisfactory. The Peer Response is not very critical or helpful because students are not skilled yet in providing appropriate advice. Hence, the changes resulting from it are not very effective.

Assignment 3

Qualitative and quantitative analyses

If the successive drafts of Assignment 3 on body language are analysed qualitatively, the comparison of the three drafts indicates that the third draft is not actually a successful version but it is better than the previous two.

In her paper, the writer probably intended to show that through body language, we can manipulate people, but she also wished to describe the problems connected with nonverbal communication. The difference between the first and the second draft is that in the first there are many questions in the introduction. In the body, she tries to provide a theoretical background for the paper and presents the basic facts concerning social interaction. Next, two examples are described to show how people can manipulate others by means of body language. However, at the end, problems with possible misunderstandings appear. The second draft is different from the first one in that there are fewer questions at the beginning and social interaction is moved from the body to the introduction. Then, after the first example, there is a theoretical paragraph on possible problems and the other example from the first draft appears to support it.

It is difficult to say what the main idea in each draft is, what purpose the examples serve, and why the conclusion emphasises using words. It appears that the multiple-draft process assignments did not improve significantly the quality of the student's papers. Nevertheless, there is a positive point that can be noticed, namely the student's developing skills of revising the paper globally since the changes that appear in the second draft concern the global level and result from the peer response.

The quantitative analysis, which should give the details of the exact changes, is quite difficult to conduct because the second draft is rewritten thoroughly, almost as a new text. Again, the conclusion may serve as an example:

Assignment 3

Agata's first draft

Above examples show that we use body language all the time. Sometimes we do this unconsciously sometimes with premeditation to achieve something. Nonverbal communication may be very helpful in the interpersonal relations but also can lead to troubles or misunderstandings. One is sure, if we really want to understand the other person we certainly should use words.

Peer Response Exercise:

Question 8: What suggestions can you offer that might improve the paper?

Marcin: The writer should make a strict and good conclusion that is the fusion of the whole article.

Response to Peer Response

Agata: My peer writes that I should make more strict conclusion summing up whole paper. I agree with him and I will improve that.

Agata's second draft

I hope that my examples are visual enough to show you how important in our communication is the body language and that I convinced you that sometimes we do not need words to speak. However, be careful with your interpretations and before you take an action, make sure that they are appropriate. Probably the best way to do that is use of real words.

Agata agrees with her fellow student's opinion that the conclusion is not clear and in the second draft, she refers to the examples in the text in order to make her conclusion more comprehensible. However, the sentences, though changed, have the same meaning as in the second draft. Agata points to the importance of body language in our life; however, she ends with the use of words as the best way to communicate. Again, although not really improved, the conclusion is revised thoroughly, which indicates the writer's willingness to change the text according to the peer's suggestion.

The third draft differs from the second in 18 surface level changes and 1 macrostructure revision. The only change that can be regarded as macrostructure modification involves narrowing the topic of the paper. The broad topic *Body language* is replaced with *How much can you say not saying anything...?* and actually shows the reader how Agata had intended to develop the composition. The added topic could also initiate further discussion between the writer and the peer as regards the ideas for the next revision. The topic modification can be treated as macrostructural alteration because such changes, following Min (2006) «change the overall summary of the text, altering the direction or the gist of the idea presented» (p. 126). The minor alterations that appear in the final draft may have been the result of the oral comments Agata received from two more peers. The peers were supposed to point to the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and suggest ideas for improvement. This oral form of the

peer response exercise may have been the reason for very superficial and short comments. Hence, unlike the second draft, Agata's final draft is not revised globally.

Conclusions and implications for teaching

In Assignment 1, the student improves her paper locally; the peer response does not help her very much. In Assignment 3, the most significant changes appear in the second draft following the peer response. The peer feedback is not much better in comparison to Assignment 1 and only some comments appear although the paper needs substantial revision. The final draft is only revised locally, probably as a result of oral peer response. The similar results were observed in other students' papers. The most significant changes were usually in the second draft, but the papers were still not effectively revised. Thus, it appears that the multiple-draft process approach was not very effective in comparison with the product approach since students did not improve their writing significantly. On the other hand, there are signs indicating that the approach might be more effective if certain modifications are introduced.

This approach appears promising in view of the fact that it raises the students' awareness of the importance of revision in general. By being required to complete such assignments throughout the semester, students begin to understand that producing coherent papers entails reworking the content to adjust it to the specific audience and purpose. If the teachers only inform the students about the importance of revision without guiding them through the process or demanding the successive drafts, the students ignore such advice. While completing the multiple-draft assignments, it is natural for the students to rework their papers because they are provided with the peer response sheets and are expected to submit all drafts to the teacher for assessment. It is the peer response activity that should be underscored as having a decisive role in the process of revision. In Assignments 3, Agata's revised first draft indicates that she learnt to treat the initial draft as a text which can even be changed thoroughly if it is evaluated as ambiguous or unclear by the peer.

For the approach to be more effective, peer response training is indispensable. Writers will revise their texts more effectively if they obtain more constructive peer feedback. Peer comments may improve as a result of the training in which the students will be taught how to notice all the gaps at the global level in their fellow

students' texts and how to offer specific suggestions. Such training can be organised as group work or pair work, where the teacher prompts the peer to ask appropriate questions and provide specific suggestions to the writer (Min, 2006; Zhu, 1995). Demonstrating to students successful revisions made by experienced writers is also recommended (Wallace and Hayes, 1991).

In conclusion, if the multiple-draft assignments are complemented with the peer response training, and the peers learn to emphasize the drawbacks of the fellow-students' texts, the writers will be able to improve their papers successfully and the whole approach will appear effective in improving the students' composing skills.

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Appendix A

Multiple-Draft Assignment 1

(adapted from Zalewski, 2001)

Identify a problem that you have encountered at school, a problem that requires a specific action or policy change. Propose a solution to this problem, present an argument in favour of this solution, and address the argument to an appropriate audience.

Time Table

- Week 1: Group discussions and oral presentations of problems and solutions.
- Week 2: First draft due. In-class peer response. Response to Peer Response.
- Week 3: Final draft due.
- Week 4: Post-assignment questionnaire.

Multiple-Draft Assignment 3

(adapted from Leki, 2004)

In this assignment, you are going to write a paper on some aspect of body language. Before you begin writing your first draft, you need to consider your audience and purpose for this assignment.

Time Table

- Week 1: Group discussions and oral presentations of ideas based on background reading.
- Week 2: First draft due. In-class peer response. Response to Peer Response.
- Week 3: Second draft due. Group conferences.
- Week 4: Final draft due. Post-assignment questionnaire.