MTDP: A Model for Teaching Writing

Gopal Prasad Bashyal

Abstract

Writing requires mastery on its basic components to make it an effective piece of discourse. It can be taught so easily that the students keep on improving and getting motivation to write much more if we follow the proper approach of teaching writing. This article attempts to highlight the basic literacy about the components and approaches of developing writing, and focuses on the model text deconstruction process (MTDP) of teaching writing. The experiment made during the competency based training laid foundation for this article.

Key words: Model Text Deconstruction Process (MTDP), academic writing, analyzing writing

Background

Writing uses visual symbols (or graphic symbols) to represent the sounds used in speaking. It is a productive skill which involves better organisation of meaning and also more accuracy of form than speaking. However, "the ability to express one's ideas in written form in a second language and to do so with reasonable accuracy and coherence is no mean achievement, since many speakers of English never totally master this skill" (Celce-Murcia, and McMcintosh, 1979 p. 187). A good piece of writing is logical, maintains cohesion, and coherence, grammatically accurate, and correct in spelling and punctuation. A written text must also provide good reasons and evidences for opinions to clarify or to persuade the readers. There is quite often no physical presence of the readers – but only an assumed audience. The readers cannot ask questions so the writer must anticipate possible questions and explain them. Good writing must be clear, organized, and made of well-crafted sentences (Ur, 2008 pp. 160-161).

Components of Writing

A good writing has four main characteristics: unity, coherence, support, and strong sentence skills. In writing the writer anticipates the level, interest and queries of the readers or audience. Another thing the writer should consider is the purpose of writing. Handwriting, spellings and punctuation – mechanics of writing – play vital role in making a text impressive. In situations where writers need to present their work in handwritten form, handwriting is an effective means to impress the readers, and poor handwriting can negatively influence reading experience (Harmer, 1999 p. 324). For the learners of English, spelling is quite difficult since there is no obvious correspondence between the sound of a word and the way it is spelt. However, correctness in form only is not enough; the writer must select words (word choice) appropriately and weave them in proper sentence structures, also considering stylistic choices which are very often personal. Organization of words, sentences, paragraphs, ideas and lay out of the text along with the content which is no least significant are other components which altogether communicate ideas more effectively.

Stages in the Learning of Writing

The learning of writing develops through various stages. Traditionally, writing stages are listed as

copying (shapes, letters, words, sentences etc. at the beginning stage), reproduction (write immediately what students have heard or read, e. g. dictation), recombination (reproduce with minor adaptations, e.g. making sentences from substitution table), guided writing (freedom in the selection of words and structures but must base on given outlines or framework, e. g. exercises like parallel writing, developing paragraph on the basis of outlines etc.), and free writing (free to write on given topics) (Bashyal, 2006 pp. 48 - 49). Writing is a process of learning the language. The following developmental stages (*Teachers' Handbook,* 2009 pp. 281) lead a learner toward the perfect kind of writing.

a. Writing as a mechanical activity: Writing is used both as a means and as an end. Writing is a means to note down new words or grammar rules or answer the comprehension questions etc whereas it is an end in itself when we write or practice writing to develop writing. The focus of the stage is on the writing itself, that is, writing as an end in itself. Learners spend considerable time on pre-communicative activities through which they learn the mechanics and conventions of writing, like handwriting, spelling and punctuation, which are necessary for written communication.

b. Writing as a linguistic activity: At this stage the aim is to provide learners practice in writing error free sentences or paragraphs on given topics. The exercises are usually completely controlled or at least partially controlled and are a means of getting learners to practice a specific language point. The kind of writing is characterized by maximal teacher input and minimal learner input.

Writing as communication: This stage represents real written communication, which is characterized by a sense of purpose, a sense of audience, and a sense of direction. The abilities that a learner requires to produce a competent piece of continuous writing would include:

Using good grammar

Having a range of vocabulary

Punctuating meaningfully

Spelling accuracy

Using a range of sentence structures

Linking ideas and information across sentences to develop a topic

Developing and organizing the content clearly and convincingly

Employing a style suitable for the purpose, reader, and occasion.

Approaches of Writing

Product approach: This is a traditional approach that focuses on the ability to produce correct texts or products. This approach values the construction of end product. It emphasizes on the development of grammatical and syntactic accuracy.

Process approach: In this approach, any piece of writing goes through various stages: pre-writing phase, drafting, editing, redrafting, and finally producing a finished version. It goes through several steps: identify why to write (purpose), identify who to write (reader or audience), gathering information or ideas, making a plan for a format, preparing the first draft, editing and revising, and preparing the second draft. The process writing is not linear but rather recursive. This means that writers plan, draft, and edit but then often re-plan, re-draft and re-edit as their mind goes changing.

Genre: This approach focuses on writing for a particular discourse community or for specific purposes. For example letter to the editor, approval letter, formal letter, news articles, etc. The writer uses special pattern of lexis, grammar, organization etc.

Creative writing: This sets students for imaginative and harder efforts to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language (Harmer, 1999 p. 328). Harmer (Ibid.) quotes Gaffield-Vile to define creative writing as 'a journey of self-discovery and self-discovery promotes learning'. The writer has to select the correct vocabulary or structure to express the experiences. Some tasks may be writing narratives or poems or plays etc.

Cooperative writing: Though not much done in our context, cooperative writing, as a writing process, helps in producing a good product because the writers in a small number of groups can discuss at each other and reach to the conclusion after synthesizing the ideas of all. It can be done well in computer. If impossible to practice in computer, the students are in groups. Each student starts writing on a topic. He writes only two sentences and gives it to another friend. Turn by turn, they write two sentences in each other's text. Then the second round begins. This way everyone writes on everyone's text. Make them sure that whatever they add should proceed the narrative in a proper way, no matter where it goes. Finally, everyone gets the story, perhaps quite interesting one

Model text deconstruction process (MTDP) approach of teaching writing: This approach is based on teacher's support as a resource for comparison and inferring insights about the appropriate form of the text. The teacher provides a model and the students deconstruct it in terms of words, grammar, styles, organization etc. and write again. The model provides a way to create something new because from a vacuum nothing emerges. This is good scaffolding that the learners need to step on to develop a necessary level of accuracy and satisfaction in writing.

Experimenting MTDP of teaching writing

Most people, including students and even teachers, find writing challenging. Writing is a complex task that requires a variety of skills. The writer must master the vocabulary, grammar, organization of the text to make a good text. Therefore, a continuous practice and model writing by the teacher can help students to develop writing. Unfortunately, in educational systems like ours teachers just dictate the final answer and students practice the final product only. I tried to practice a model text deconstruction process (MTDP) of teaching writing that provides students a model text and communication on the given model. This helps students studying the model and analyzing what a good text contains.

MTDP follows certain procedures. For example, firstly, the teacher carries out a demonstration of this method. The initial task is warm up by managing a short discussion asking questions, such as 'When did you come here?', 'Why are you here?', 'What are you doing now?', 'What do you think about the programme?', 'How do you inform your family members?' etc. can be asked if it is about writing a post card letter about a programme. The model post card letter is distributed then. The deconstruction of the given model takes place by eliciting potential sections of the letter; the details of arrival, purpose of the programme, present activities, feelings about the trip, plans for the future and possible returning could be elicited. After that the grammar and structures are elicited. The lay out and format of the letter can be discussed. Now, the learners write their own postcards and share to each other. Secondly, the demonstration procedures are summarised and reflected on the session considering the purposes of each activity. Thirdly, the overall process is evaluated.

I decided to teach writing a postcard. This experiment was done with the Lower Secondary and Secondary level English trainee teachers at Educational Training Centre, Palpa. The following steps were practiced.

Brainstorming: I led a short discussion on how the trainees communicate at home while they are in the training. Then we discussed that postcard letter can be a good medium to communicate about a journey or visit or training.

Postcard: The trainees were asked to write a postcard letter to any of their family members or friends describing about their training. All of them wrote. A few samples are given in Appendix I.

Study of the letters: The letters written by the trainees were studied and identified that they have problems with spelling, grammar, content, format and organization of the content. The letters were exchanged with the members who finish writing early. Everyone got to study at least one friend's letter.

Model text: The researcher gave the following model texts which are adapted from

the *Handbook*, SCA Trainer Training Programme, Hyderabad, India. A few model texts for deconstruction practice are given in Appendix III.

Dear all,

I arrived here safely on 15th. This place is very warm and sunny and the food is spicy. Our training starts on the 19th. Meanwhile we are having a great time visiting the historical monuments, bazaars and other places of interest. We plan to start serious work next week.

Will be home in six weeks.

Love

Amelia

Dear everybody

We arrived safely in Switzerland. The weather is beautiful, the people are friendly and the food is delicious. Yesterday we went to carpet market like the one in the picture. I don't want to come home!

Alex

Dear all,

I arrived here safely. It's very cold and windy but the mountains are really beautiful. Our load though isn't very nice. We eat everything from packets and tins. Yesterday we put up our flag.

Home soon

Best wishes

Edmund

Deconstruction of the text: The above model texts - post card letters - were analyzed and compared with the letter the trainees have written. The trainees found the mistakes in their letter themselves. Mainly the following components were considered.

Addressing/ saluting - Concluding the letter

Closing- Content

Grammar- Spelling

Selection of words - Vocabulary

Organization- Coherence and cohesion

Size and layout etc.

After that the trainees were asked to write the postcard letters. A few of them are given in Appendix II. The postcard letters were analyzed and found that improvements had been made in the following aspects:

- Greeting/ saluting- Spelling -Word choice, collocation

-Contents e.g. arrival, weather, accommodation, foods, training, returning home.

- Grammar   - Organization   - Layout

However, there were still a few mistakes regarding collocation, greetings and closing of the letters. Then the discussion on each step was made: warm up, presentation, analysis and deconstruction of model post cards, grammar considerations, practice, and scaffolding of activity with materials, peer feedback session, and group sharing of examples. They aslo collected trainees' responses regarding the use of the technique. They were asked to respond to four questions. They actively participated in the activities and responded to them as below.

1. Writing is difficult because it:
-   Lacks interaction,
-   Requires good planning, practice and accuracy,
-   Demands mastery on the components like vocabulary, grammar, syntax, layout, organization, content, mechanics of writing etc.

2. Techniques usually followed to teach writing are:
    - Controlled practice   - Mind map
    - Guided writing   - Model of written texts
    - Product based   - Oral practice
    - Scaffolding/ outlining -Parallel writing

3. Model text deconstruction process is a better technique to teach writing because:
    - It provides chances to learn.
    - Models help them to develop confidence.
    - It's student based approach.
-   Model provides a way to create something new because from a vacuum nothing emerges.

- It's planned, systematic and learner centered

- During analyzing the text, the learners know the components of writing

- It's a creative process.

- There is ample practice and interaction

- It's systematic, orderly and organized

4. MTDP makes teaching easier because it:

- Follows the steps of developing writing.

- Provides model to produce similar text.

- Provides models.

- Is creative and follows different procedures and practice.

- Is based on planning and develops in learners' pace of learning.

- Makes students practice of possible words and structure.

- Provides components of writing.

- Gives a model which is helpful to make an idea to categorize, draft and edit.

- Gives outlines.

- Develops thinking about the text.

Conclusion

This experiment proved that if writing is taught systematically, it can be less daunting and difficult than many students believe. If the students know the components of writing, they can tackle challenges based on their understanding of those components. For example, if students have the conceptual apparatus for thinking about and working on the mechanics of writing, contents, grammar, connotation, word choice, spelling, punctuation, commenting on and ending the text, organization, clarity and so on–they are able to produce better writing. By analyzing models and approaching their own writing with that understanding, students can write much better. They cannot do anything in a vacuum. When we practiced the model text deconstruction process of developing writing, the learners get excited to analyze the text from different points of views. They use skills they accumulate while analyzing the text while writing the similar text, as well as the motivation.

Mr Gopal Prasad Bashyal is the Chairperson, NELTA Palpa Branch. He is MA in English and M Ed in English Education from Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Currently, he is an English Instructor at Educational Training Centre, Palpa and also teaches ELT and Phonetics and Phonology at Tansen Multiple Campus Tansen, Palpa. He has taken different TOTs,MTOTs and trainings from NCED,British Council,NELTA and American Centre and EFLU Hyderabad,India and conducted different trainings and presented papers at local and national levels. He has written a book *Teaching English to Beginnners* and published several articles on ELT and education in national and local English and Nepali vernaculars as well. He is the Editor of *English Language Professional* and *SCA Voices.*

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Appendix I

Sample Post cards written by the teachers before the demonstration of MTDP

2nd July, 2009
Tansen Palpa
To
Dear daughter
Ram Bahadur
Thank you very much for your letter, Now. I am here at Tansen Palpa for five months training programme. I'll learn many techniques and skills here. How about your study?
Thank you
your brother
Man Bahadur

To Kamal Kafle 18 Ashadh 2066
MadanpokharaTansen Palpa
Dear   brother

Thank you for your letter which I got yesterday. I'm in Tansen for 1 months English teachers training is running well. How is your sutdy? I will come back after one month. Thank you.
your brother
Krishna Kafle

Appendix II

Sample Post cards written by teachers after the demonstration of MTDP

Dear daughter

I arrived in Tansen safely and comfortably last week. The climate is very nice. Everything looks here beautiful. I have settled myself with a family as paying guest. My training classes have started since the day before yesterday.
My friends and trainers also very cooperative and frank. It is very nice time here. I wish you'd manage to visit this place during my stay. I miss you all.

With love from daddy

Dear brother

I arrived here safely on 18th. The weather is cloudy and stayed in a hotel. The food though isn't very delicious. Our training is running now. I learnt techniques of writing skill. I'll return on 27th of Asadh.

Your brother
Man Bahadur

Dear friend

I arrived on 18ᵗʰ ᴬˢᵃᵈʰ. I feel very comfortable to stay in Tansen. Our training is running well. After one month I will come back.
Yours

Dear mother

I arrived here yesterday. In the day here is not hot but mosquitoes disturb me at night. All the food is delicious. I visit many historical places. I take part in training. I will return back home after 8 days.

With love from
Bishnu Bhandari

Appendix III

Model texts for deconstruction practice

A. Description of a person

The police describe a robber: The man is in his early thirties, is slightly built, and **is** about five feet eight inches tall. He has blue eyes and a pale complexion, and has shoulder-length dark hair. He is well-dressed, wears a gold ring and speaks with a London accent. Police believe he is still carrying the gun used in the robbery... (Adapted from *Meanings into Words* Upper-Intermediate p. 16 CUP)

Possible task: Describe general appearance of your friend.

B. Describing a process: How to make a cup of coffee

It is not difficult to make a perfect cup of coffee if you follow this simple process. In preparation, you will need a coffee mug, a teaspoon, and some coffee. If you like coffee sweet and white, you will also need sugar and milk or cream. The first step is to boil some water. While the water is boiling, add two teaspoons of coffee to the coffee mug. Next, pour in some hot water and stir. If you like sweet and white coffee, then add sugar and milk or cream to taste, and stir. You now have your cup of coffee. (Adapted from *Teachers' Handbook* p.266 Hyderabad)

Possible task: How to send an email. Or How to make a cup of tea.

C. Comparing past and present

Many Eskimos no longer live as they used to. They live in houses, and they work in factories and for American oil companies. Many Eskimos have become completely Americanised - they wear Western clothes, they go to school, and most of them speak English. Instead of hunting and fishing, they buy food from supermarkets: they even buy frozen meat and vegetables. (Adapted from *Meanings into Words* Intermediate p16 CUP)

Possible task: Compare village life in the past and life in the city at present.