Using the Combined Approach of Product Writing and Process Writing in the Preparation Step of Teaching Writing in High Schools

Vu Tran-Thanh

Abstract

Writing, as it is usually considered, is the most difficult skills to master of the four. It is a meaning-making process where linguistic, cognitive, social and creative factors are at play. High school students, if they ever want to acquire this skill, need to be supplied with enough support for the preparation step before they actually write something. This study aims to suggest a teaching approach which can provide high school students with appropriate support of grammar, structures, vocabulary as well as ideas and organization in the form of different tasks.

The paper begins by discussing different definitions of writing skills as well as the importance of writing skills in teaching and learning English. Two mainstream methods of teaching writing, i.e. process writing and product writing, with their advantages and disadvantages are also presented. These theories are then applied to examine and analyze some writing lessons taken from textbooks used in high schools to illustrate the intended approach of the design of this book as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

The preliminary result of the study explains ways to balance between process writing and product writing. Language support from product writing and organization, collaborative work, ways to generate ideas from process writing are discussed in depth in this part, which leads to the affirmation of the importance of the preparation step for a writing task. This part also demonstrates a general approach to provide students with enough appropriate support so that they would feel confident to write.

Introduction

In the past ten years, English learning and teaching in Vietnam has undergone dramatic development both in quantity and quality. As a core subject in the National Curriculum, English is taught in virtually every high school in Vietnam and it is, therefore, studied by a huge number of students. In addition to that, as the country’s economy is developing rapidly, many people feel the need to communicate in English so as to find good jobs in foreign companies, to study abroad, to do business with international partners, to gain promotion at work or just to satisfy the inclination to learn the language. High school students, those who cannot be left out of the trend, have the desire to use English for communication as well. However, the stimulus for Vietnamese students to use English for communication, especially the oral form, in their social environment is definitely not enough. Vietnamese students, then, have to find an additional and effective way to develop their communicative skills if they still feel the desire to master English and use English as a means to communicate. In this case, practicing writing skill is probably the most possible.

Writing skill, or written communication as it should be called when mentioned with the other two forms of communication, i.e. verbal and nonverbal, plays a very important role in everyday life. In many occasions when the receiver of the message is not present at the time it created, verbal communication seems impossible. That is when the sender has to make a message that the receiver can read at any time, unlike a conversation that is carried on in real time. In Vietnamese students’ case, as they do not have many opportunities to practice speaking English, emails or letters to a foreign friend
or even their classmates seem to be more possible to them. Written communication is still of great importance especially when it is impossible or rather costly to speak to a faraway person or to gather many people together just to listen to a message. However, the teaching of writing skill in Vietnamese high schools is partly neglected because of many reasons, among which are students’ low proficiency and the limitation of time. That teachers provide students with enough and appropriate support for their writing-learning process makes it possible to overcome these obstacles. To do this, an appropriate approach, which originally comes from the two most dominating approaches in teaching writing, namely product writing and process writing, should be taken advantage of and applied into the most suitable stage of the teaching process.

Of the three stages of a writing lesson, prewriting, or the preparation step, is the most obvious one to be taught in class. As it takes most of the time allotted for the lesson, prewriting does all the hard work of preparing for the later stages. While-writing can be carried out at home if there is not enough time for students to write in class while post-writing is something like a direct communication between the teacher and each student when the errors are marked in the paper. Accordingly, prewriting should receive much attention as it helps to solve the problem of students’ low proficiency, which is by far the most significant one.

By definition, “prewriting” or the preparation step can be understood as the initial stage in which teachers prepare students for their actual writing by providing them with appropriate support of language, ideas and organization so that while-writing can happen as smoothly as possible. “Product writing” and “process writing” on the other hand, are the two different approaches which are used to teach writing. “Product writing” is the way of teaching writing which focuses on the final product while neglecting the process through which that piece of writing is created. In contrast, process writing concentrates on writing itself, which means the process that a write has to undergo to produce a piece of writing.

This paper has been deliberately written to seek to remedy the problems that beset students’ opportunities to use writing as a means to practice communication, which should be mentioned here as their lack of appropriate language for proper writing. To do this, it suggests the principles formed from the characteristics of product writing and process writing which can be used to design the activities used as a preparation step prior to actual writing. It aims to help teachers in making students feel at ease when they put their pen on a sheet of paper and write all in a breath without stopping too long to seek for ideas or to wonder about the order he or she should arrange the ideas in. In other words, this study has been written to help teachers supply students with low proficiency with suitable language material i.e. vocabulary and sentence structures as well as the organization of ideas so that they will not be bewildered and end up in using wrong words or phrases that they pick up from a dictionary without thinking much of their usages.

In order to achieve its goals, the study is divided into three parts and one bibliography page.

1. The first part is the Introduction which gives readers a brief overview of the study, including some background information, the definitions of some key terms, its significance and design.

2. Part two, the Literature review, presents the current literature on the teaching of writing in general and, in particular, the prewriting stage. It also draws a comparison between process writing and product writing, which is used to analyze some lessons from the high school English textbooks and the Teacher’s Guide in order to show the differences between them. As the differences are spotted out, they will be examined to anticipate whether any problems would occur if are used in real teaching without any adaptation.
3. The last part, which is the result of the study, presents some solutions to the anticipated problems which would act as the foundation to suggest some principles used to formulate the steps for adapting the lessons in the textbooks.

4. The References page lists all the books, web pages, research papers and journals that the author has consulted.

In a few words, this discussion paper, by all means, has been written to form an appropriate approach of teaching writing, which is the combination of product writing and process writing, to make the preparation step of teaching this skill in high schools easier for both teachers and students.

**Literature review**

1. **Definitions of writing skill:**

Without a doubt, writing is one of the most significant inventions in human history. It marks the end of prehistory period and opens the doors to a world where human knowledge is recorded not only in verbal form. Carroll (1990), in his “Student Success Guide – Writing Skills”, states, “It provides a relatively permanent record of information, opinions, beliefs, feelings, arguments, explanations, theories, etc.” As writing serves many different purposes, it seems to have taken on different definitions of different groups of people in order to suit their different needs and purposes of writing.

Patel and Jain (2008), in their book “English Language Teaching”, provide a definition of writing in a linguistic view, “Writing is a kind of linguistic behaviour; a picture is not. It presents the sounds of language through symbols.” Symbols here can be understood as the letters that people have invented to represent the sounds of spoken language. Writing mentioned here, therefore, is rather mechanical since it seems to involve no communication.

According to Klein (as cited in Tan, 2009) “writing is the ability to use pen and paper to express ideas through symbols”. This way, representations on the paper will have meaning and content that could be communicated to other people by the writer.

As the introductory page of the website Summer Institute of Linguistics International (1999) defines, “Writing skills are specific abilities which help writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message.” Here again, the communicative function of writing is highlighted though it still concentrates on the writer’s message rather than the readers themselves.

Byrne (1993) in his book “Teaching Writing Skill” points out that writing is the act of forming letters or combinations of letters which relate to the sounds we make when we speak. More than that, he also emphasizes on the conventions which writers use to form words, sentences and texts. Above all, he highlights the reason for which we write: the readers. “Writing involves the encoding of a message of some kind: that is, we translate our thoughts into language.”

Whatever ways the mentioned authors use to define writing, it is quite clear to say that writing is a cognitive process in which our thoughts are converted into symbols. Most authors, additionally, underline the importance of writing as a means of communication in which the readers are also involved. Pedagogically speaking, teacher of writing should be aware of this in order to make writing lessons meaningful and acquirable for students.

As Lewis Carroll makes clear in Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland:

“I haven’t opened it yet,” said the White Rabbit, “but it seems to be a letter, written by the prisoner to somebody.”
“It must have been that,” said the King, “unless it was written to nobody, which isn’t usual, you know.”

2. Product approach, process approach and genre approach:

One most frequent question that many writing teachers have ever asked is which approach they should use to teach their students. According to Husan and Akhand (2010), for effective writing in EFL/ESL classroom, ELT practitioners suggest three approaches: product, process and genre. Of the three, product and process approaches have dominated much of the teaching of writing over the last twenty years.

2.1 Product approach:

According to Gabrielatos (2000), a product approach is “a traditional approach, in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, which is usually presented and analyzed at an early stage”. This has been a quite popular approach because it focuses on the final product of writing, which is often seen as students’ achievement in learning to write in a language. In addition to that, product writing also plays a significant role in exam-oriented courses where improvement in learners’ test scores following the completion of a strategy training program is measured.

Pincas (as cited in Badger and White, 2000) sees writing as being primarily about linguistic knowledge, with attention focused on the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax, and cohesive devices. This is one of the most explicit descriptions of product approach ever provided.

According to Steele (2004), a product-oriented lesson is usually carried out in four stages:

- Stage one: Models texts are given to students and important features are highlighted.
- Stage two: Isolated controlled practice of the highlighted features is provided in this stage.
- Stage three: Ideas are organized in this most important stage.
- Stage four: In this final step, students individually produce the final product by using the skills, structures and vocabulary they have been taught.

2.2 Process approach:

Recently, the teaching of writing has begun to move away from a concentration on the written product to an emphasis on the process of writing. The growing dissatisfaction with model-based (product) approaches to the teaching of writing had coincided with a growing interest in discovering how writers actually write. Many teachers and researchers also suggest that students should act as a writer inventing his piece of writing when they write something, which will not limit them from any fixed format. Unfortunately, “process cannot be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage” (Murray, 1980). This leads to the development of process writing approach which, as its name shows, focuses on the series of things a writer must do to have his final product finished.

Kroll (2001) defines process approach as follows:

“The “process approach” serves today as an umbrella term for many types of writing courses...What the term captures is the fact that student writers engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than a single-shot approach. They are not expected to produce and submit complete and polished responses to their writing assignments without going through stages of drafting and receiving feedback on their drafts, be it from peers and/or from the teacher, followed by revision of their evolving texts.”
A process approach, therefore, tends to focus more on varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use: brainstorming, group discussion and rewriting. A typical sequence of activities used in a process-oriented lesson could proceed as follows:

Stage one: Brainstorming and discussion are used to generate ideas. The teacher remains in the background, only providing language support if required, so as not to inhibit students in the production of ideas.

Stage two: Students note down their ideas and judge quality and usefulness of those.

Stage three: Ideas are organized into a mind map, spidergram, or linear form, which would help students with the structure of their texts.

Stage four: Students write the first draft. This is done in class and frequently in pairs or groups.

Stage five: Students become the readers of each other's work by exchanging their writing with a classmate. This helps students develop an awareness of a writer producing something to be read and thus can improve their own drafts.

Stage six: Drafts are returned and improvements are made.

Stage seven: A final draft is written.

Stage eight: Students once again exchange and read each other's work.

2.3 Genre approach:

In the past ten years, we have seen the growing importance of genre approaches in the English language classroom. As defined by Husan & Akhan (2010), “Genre-based approach considers writing as a social and cultural practice. The purpose of this writing involves the context where the writing occurs, and the conventions of the target discourse community.” Badger and White (2000) see genre approaches in strong similarities with product approaches and “in some ways, genre approaches can be regarded as an extension of product approaches.”

As the genre approach to teaching writing focus on the language and discourse features if particular texts and the context in which the text is used, it would be beneficial for students’ later communicative success. However, as Munice (2002) states that genre approach emphasizes more on the readers, and on the conventions that a piece of writing needs to follow in order to be successfully accepted by its readership, it is obvious to say that the specification of either the knowledge of text or social, cultural for students is a difficult job. As teaching focuses on the reader expectations, the products and the way social purposes are expressed effectively; students need to have rhetorical understanding of texts.

In the context of the high school textbooks where students are taught to become independent writers (Hoang Van Van et al., 2006), genre approach seems to be of less importance because of its focus. Additionally, most of the writing lessons in the textbook are designed in very unfamiliar context where students have to write something that they will never use in real life, i.e. their social context. More than that, the writing lessons are designed under the two main approaches: product writing and process writing. As a result, this research paper will only examine these two approaches specifically.

2.4 A comparison between product writing and process writing:

According to Murray (as cited in Villanueva et al., 2003), “Most of us are trained as English teachers by studying a product: writing. Our critical skills are honed by examining literature, which is finished writing; language as it has been used by authors…Naturally we try to use our training. It’s an investment and so we teach writing as a product, focusing our critical attentions on what our students have done…” Many teachers also find themselves teaching product writing as they focus on evaluating students’ final products and correcting every mistake in any pieces of writing that their students make.
It is, however, arguable to say whether that way of teaching writing is good or bad. Practically, many English teachers may have the fear that their students will not get good scores in some international examinations in English like KET, PET, FCE, TOEFL or IELTS where there is always a criterion for accuracy use of language. Hence, some characteristics of this approach have been used in many examination preparation courses by many exam teachers so that their students would achieve the best scores.

Notwithstanding, many teachers may argue that only focusing on the final product makes students less creative; and for them, writing is nothing better than a task they have to complete. To escape from this, many tend to drift their concentration to process writing approach which focuses more on writing as itself i.e. the way a piece of writing is created. White (1988) states that it is only by engaging in the process of writing itself that writers ultimately discover what it is that they want to say. Indeed, the final product may be a surprise. It would seem that writing is acts of discovery and a powerful educational tool.

From that point of view, many teachers see process approaches as something similar to task-based learning in that students are given considerable freedom within the task. Lexical or grammatical items are not the most important factors that affect students. However, process approaches do not deny all the interest in the product. These approaches still consider the final product something as a means to communicate and a way that the writing process is to achieve. A process focused approach differs from the product centered one is that the outcome of writing is not preconceived.

A comparison of the most general features of the two can be seen below:

Table 1: Product and process writing: A comparison (Steele, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Writing</th>
<th>Product Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text as a resource for comparison</td>
<td>Imitate model text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas as starting point</td>
<td>Organization of ideas are more important than ideas themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one draft</td>
<td>One draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More global, focused on purpose, theme, text type i.e. reader is emphasized</td>
<td>Features highlighted including controlled practice of those features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on creative process</td>
<td>Emphasis on end product</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table below shows a comparison about the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of process and product writing: A comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Process writing</th>
<th>Product writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Advantages           | - Readers are emphasized, which makes writing more communicative.  
- Ideas are generated at starting point and developed through the process, which makes writers more creative. |
|                      | - Organization of ideas is emphasized, which is important in some kinds of writing consisting fixed layout, style and organization (business report writing, for instance).  
- Controlled practice of |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Highlighted features will help low-proficient students familiarize with important necessary language.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Collaborative work allows students to learn from their partners.</td>
<td>- As students have to imitate the text, their creativity is discouraged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- As ideas are generated by students themselves, those with low language proficiency will probably find it difficult to contribute any ideas.</td>
<td>- The final product is more important than the process itself, which makes writing here not really real and communication does not exist at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Because accuracy is not an important factor in this approach as long as communication occurs, students who study under this approach will lose marks in exams like TOEFL or IELTS – where there is always a criterion for use of grammar and vocabulary.</td>
<td>- Individual work will not allow students to learn from their partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It requires a lot of time to complete a process-oriented lesson, which is quite impossible in many circumstances.</td>
<td>- Process approach is really significant to let the students generate their ideas in a comprehensive manner. It helps a student to organize his/her thoughts in a systematic way which enables the student to write fluently in a different language which is not his/her mother tongue. On the other hand, the product approach is also important for a student to be able to realize the competence level he/she requires according to the task, age and maturity.” (Hasan &amp; Akhand, 2010).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We, after all, can say that in a world where learners are the center of the teaching-learning process, process writing has increasingly dominated the field of teaching writing thanks to its concentration on learners themselves, the collaboration which can help them generate great ideas, and the encouragement toward their creativeness. More than that, when the reader is emphasized, it also means that process writing allows communication to happen, which is the main goal for every of the four skills to pursue.

3. The use of the balanced approach in current language teaching.

Though an approach can be more useful than another in some circumstances, it still has some disadvantages that can only be compensated by the advantages of others. Thus, both process and product approaches are significant in teaching writing. “Process approach is really significant to let the students generate their ideas in a comprehensive manner. It helps a student to organize his/her thoughts in a systematic way which enables the student to write fluently in a different language which is not his/her mother tongue. On the other hand, the product approach is also important for a student to be able to realize the competence level he/she requires according to the task, age and maturity.” (Hasan & Akhand, 2010).

As we can see, a collaborative approach which is adapted by taking the advantages of both approaches is a necessity, especially for teaching students with low competence in English. As Hasan and Akhan (2010) state in their research “So in EFL/ESL contexts like us, where English exposure is very instrumental, more fruitful approaches to teaching writing should be applied. To do this, neither the product, nor the process alone, nor the genre process approach is the best alternative for students if we take the learning habit of our students into consideration. What we suggest is using the balanced instructional and curricular approach of the product and process approach to teaching writing. The emergence of genre theory does not attempt to replace or suggest abandoning the process approach to writing, but draws on the demand for a more balanced approach to teaching ESL/EFL.” They also
suggest that both approaches have their benefits and drawbacks, “accordingly, it is believed that complementary use both of approaches helps student writers develop their skills in using language by experiencing a whole writing process as well as gain knowledge from the model texts. Such a complementary use of both approaches would help students to be authors rather than copiers, and so have the potential benefit of integrating critical thinking into their academic writing.” This has also become a trend in designed course books in the world. We can take Language Leader – Intermediate by David Cotton, David Falvey and Simon Kent, published by Pearson Longman in 2008 as an example. The writing part in this book is preceded by a number of activities which require students to brainstorm general ideas on the topic as well as to practice using some key phrases which will later be used in the writing stage itself. Then students will be asked to analyze a model text, which is followed by a number of other activities. Those activities focus on vocabulary and structures related to the topic. Finally, the topic on the same theme is given. The approach in this book also takes the advantages of both product writing (supply students with language and organization) and process writing (ideas are generated at the very first steps). Another book which is also written using this collaborative approach for the writing parts is New Cutting Edge – Pre-Intermediate by Sarah Cunningham, Peter Moor and Jane Comyns Carr, published by Pearson Longman in 2005. The writing lessons in this book usually begin with a model text which has some uncompleted blanks. This requires students to work to fill in those blanks with given sentences or to analyze the way it is organized. Then students are required to write about something on the same topic as that of the model. Only some guidelines are given at this stage. It is clearly seen that as the model text is taken advantage of to help students figure out the organization of ideas is something from the product approach. And that only general guidelines are given can show the freedom which the process approach offers students. However, the book which can be seen clearly using the combination of the two approaches is New Matrix – Pre-Intermediate by Kathy Gude and Michael Duckworth, published by Oxford University Press in 2008. The writing lessons in this book offer students much opportunity to think about the topic right at the beginning with some warm-up questions. Then a model text is given so that students understand more about the organization of the text. Next, many different exercises focusing on the use of vocabulary and structures are provided to support students with enough language. After that, students are guided to plan their ideas, which are generated either at the beginning of the lessons or brainstormed for more at this stage, into the most appropriate order. Finally, students put everything together in their mind and write about the given topic. It is rather clear to say that this is a combination of writing process and writing product which highlights the advantages of both.

It can be seen from the analysis above that for students with not very high language proficiency, i.e. those who are moving from elementary to intermediate, a writing approach which can both encourage their communication and creativity as well as support them with appropriate organization and language material is a need. This would make us, the teachers, responsible for choosing the advantages and adapting the approaches for our writing lessons.

4. The importance of the preparation stage.

An athlete always does some warm-up exercise before he actually plays sports so that he can do his best and avoid regrettable injuries. It should be the same story for a student who is going to write something to do some warm-ups like that. The preparation stage in which students do that kind of thing is called “prewriting” as a terminology in the TESOL field by language teachers and its importance is widely recognized. As Peha (2002) states, “Prewriting is a time that you can use to experiment, to jot down a few quick ideas, to try out something new without having to try very hard, to make a little time to gather your thoughts and choose a direction before you start drafting.” He also considers prewriting a way to get students’ mind loose and limber so that “by the time you’re ready to
start drafting, you can push the pencil around the page without straining your brain too hard.” Boiarsky, in her article in the April issue of *English Journal* (1982), also claims that “Obviously, the importance of prewriting cannot be overemphasized, for it motivates and prepares students for engaging in the remaining two phases of the writing process. It is during this phase of writing that students must recognize they have choices in approaching their subject and their selection is the essence of creativity in writing.” As can be seen, that step makes students feel at ease when they do the hard work of writing as well as shun the hesitation of lacking appropriate ideas with its many benefits.

First and foremost, the preparation step gives students time to brainstorm for ideas. Many students complain that they do not have any ideas to write about a certain topic just because they are not prepared enough. Teachers, therefore, can organize a lot of activities for this stage to have their students work collaboratively in groups to find ideas for the writing. It is not important that students can find the most wonderful idea or not. As a matter of fact, they just have to generate as many ideas as possible. As Peha (2002) suggests, “You can do anything that will help you come up with good ideas for writing. It doesn’t really matter what you do, as long as it involves turning on your brain and thinking about your topic.” When being capable of doing so, they have successfully completed this stage.

Right after that, organization of ideas is also something that students need from the preparation step. Some students, though have many great ideas, can make bad writing because they do not know how to put their ideas in a logical order. Teachers, then, have to help students organize their ideas into mind maps, spider grams or linear forms. This will not only make students less bewildered but also help to produce a coherent piece of writing.

Last but not least, the preparation step is also a great opportunity for students to acquire necessary vocabulary and structures for actual writing. Using inappropriate words and phrases or word-for-word translation is the most frequent problem that most writing teachers encounter when marking the writing products. To avoid this, structures should be practiced and vocabulary should be supplied prior to the actual writing. However, teachers must be careful in doing this in order to leave students space to perform their creativity. Very controlled structure-practice and too many supplementary words will only give students opportunity to choose and write, not to think.

The preparation step for writing is always considered an indispensable part of the writing process. Without it, students will have no or not enough ideas to be arranged in suitable organization as well as the language needed for their writing task.

5. Analysis of writing lessons in the high school textbooks.

5.1 Intended approach of designing the textbooks.

The textbooks with which high school students are currently studying are also designed to set communicative skills as the main objective of the teaching-learning process; knowledge about the language is only the means to form and develop the communicative skills (Hoang Van Van et al., 2006). As mentioned in the Teacher’s Guide version, a writing lesson in Tiếng Anh 11 and Tiếng Anh 12 usually begins with a model which is followed by a number of tasks. Students have to finish those tasks in order to learn about the contents, structures and vocabulary which are commonly used in the writing genre they are studying. After that, students are required to write with provided guidelines. The guidelines can be in form of suggested lexical items or some questions which students can use to finish their writing. However, the writing lessons in those books are somehow different from those of Tiếng Anh 10 where teachers control most of the process. They are designed to give students relative freedom and comfort. Some lessons do not provide students with a model but some suggestions about the contents; students then are free to choose whatever style they want for the writing.
5.2 Analysis of the writing lessons in the textbooks.

As a consequence of the intended approach in designing the textbook, the writing lessons in the textbooks used in high school can be classified into two categories:

- Product-oriented group: the lessons which provides models or very controlled guidelines which require students to imitate or write exactly about the given information.
- Process-oriented group: the lessons with only suggestions for students. Students decide how and what to write all by themselves.

There is a lesson (Unit 9) which is really close to the balanced approach. However, as there is no model text, students may not know how to organize their ideas for a formal letter in the one they have to write. Thus, it is considered a process-oriented one because of its communicative purpose.

Although it is mentioned in the Teacher’s Guide that the lessons here give students comfort and freedom, there are some cases where students have to write about nothing but the given information in the textbook. Moreover, the main goal for productive skills like speaking and writing is students’ ability to communicate in real situations as stated by the book writers (Hoang Van Van et al., 2006), many writing topics in those books do not match that intention. In one lesson, they have to write about the preparations for the Asian Games held in Vietnam; in another, they are required to write an acknowledgement letter to someone who has donated an amount of money for their school library.

5.3 Anticipated problems that students may encounter when studying the writing lessons:

As analyzed in the previous parts, the teaching and learning of writing based on the current textbooks can involve many problems. Students, if they are ever taught these lessons, may encounter these problems as they progress from the very first step of writing.

The first problem to be mentioned here is that the lack of ideas. In some very free lessons where students are only given nothing but some very brief suggestions, the most frequent question to be asked is “What should I write?” They do not know what to write about a certain topic which is put in no context. Their heads may completely go blank as they put their pen on the paper. They cannot think of a proper way to write the best introduction, some very fascinating thoughts to make a great body or some appropriate words to give the successful conclusion.

The second problem can occur when students can find some ideas but are now confused about the order to arrange those. Some students do not know what idea is more important than another. They, therefore, do not know what idea to mention first, second and next. Students can also find it hard to write a letter of acknowledgement or giving information as they have no idea about the format and writing style of those letters. This may cause teachers frustration or amusement when marking the writings as they find the ideas are arranged in a strange way.

The third problem to be mentioned here is problem with language. As previously mentioned, because most Vietnamese students have low competence in English, they may encounter huge difficulties when trying to finish some pieces of writing. In some lessons where not much support of vocabulary of the theme and structures is given, students may spend much of their time looking up words in dictionary or finding the right structures to use. They may also use the method of word-forward Vietnamese-English translation which is often called “Vietnamese style” by most teachers. This can cause very serious misunderstanding or even worse: no understanding can ever exist at all.

Last but not least, many writing topics in this textbook are given as unreal situations which never occur in students’ everyday life. Thus, the communication goal of teaching and learning languages is not taken into account. Students may feel it ridiculous to write about something really different from their life.
As analyzed above, there are many problems arising because of the differences between the lessons in the textbook and the intentions of the book writers. The problems, namely lacking ideas, organization of ideas and the necessity of appropriate language for each genre of writing and unreal situations, must be eliminated as teachers plan to teach any lesson from this textbook.

**Discussion and recommendations**

1. **The balanced/combined approach in solving the anticipated problems:**

   As can be seen from the analysis of some popular course books, the combination of product writing and process writing is rather favored by book writers. It takes the advantages of both approaches, which attempts to support students throughout their process of writing.

   Process writing is taken advantages of to make students brainstorm for their own ideas, which will later be used for the writing, at the very beginning of the lesson. This will make students more creative and eager to produce very unique pieces of writing, which will help in solving the problem of lacking ideas. More than that, this process emphasizes on the readers, in other word, on communication. Thanks to that, writing will be more purposeful and meaningful and students will feel that they have a reason to write in addition to the feeling of completing a task and will no longer wonder why they have to write a certain thing. That students have that positive feeling may help in eliminating the problems of unreal situations.

   Besides, the advantages of product writing are also made used of to administer students suggested organization of their ideas as well as the support of language. Highlighted features in each writing genre, which are usually grammar points and necessary lexical items, will be practiced to make students familiarize with the target genre. Thanks to this help, low proficient students will not have to make much effort to look up words in dictionary or to find the appropriate structures for a certain type of writing. Nor do they have to think of the most suitable way to arrange their ideas for the provided model text is now a very good suggestion of organization. The two problems, namely organization of ideas and support of appropriate language, are now solved thanks to the advantages of this approach.

2. **Principles in designing prewriting activities:**

   Having carefully studied point of view in designing writing lessons in some popular textbooks and the solutions to the anticipated problems in this chapter, the author suggests the principles below which will be used to adapt the writing lessons in the high school textbooks, and furthermore, suggest the prewriting activities.

   1. Ideas for the topic, though sometimes can be about something very general, are generated at the very beginning stage of the lesson and will be developed through the later stages.

   2. The model text is provided so that students will be able to:
      a. compare their ideas with those of the text and the ways in which they are organized in a process-oriented lesson.
      b. learn about the format of the writing genre as well as the frequently-used structures in a certain type of writing in a product-oriented lesson.

   3. Provided support on language must supply students with:
      a. appropriate vocabulary as well as practice on structures.
      b. more ideas for the topic; however, this must not prevent students’ creativity in writing.

   4. Any topics which provide unreal situations or do not show any communication will be adapted into some other communicative forms.
Conclusion

Writing skills, as a means of communication, have always been difficult to teach; especially in the context of Vietnamese high schools where many problems lie among teachers, students and textbooks. These problems include teachers’ lack of the appropriate teaching approach, students’ low language proficiency, little support from the textbooks, the mismatching of the lessons in the textbooks and the intention of the book writers. However, these challenges seem to become one to be solved as long as teachers can find a most suitable way to adapt the writing lessons in those textbooks. To do this, not any single approach in the field of teaching and learning English can be solely used. That is when the two most influential approaches, product writing and process writing are employed by combining them to form a balanced one which simultaneously fosters the strengths and minimizes the weaknesses of each. This would not only provide students with immediate support of language material, organization of ideas but would also highlight the importance of writing as a process where the writers and readers are part of it and communicative purposes are of use. All of these would, therefore, probably make the preparation stage of teaching and learning writing easier and smoother.

It can be said in a few words that this paper has so far recommended some principles formed from the combined approach of product and process writing which high school teachers can somehow take advantages of to adapt and design their own writing lessons to achieve the best goals in teaching writing.

The study presented here, though limited in the textbooks used in high school, can still be of use when applied in some other contexts where teachers and students are facing the same problems and are in search of an appropriate approach of teaching writing. It is suggested that English teachers, whether they are working with the high school textbooks or with any other books which contains some similar problems, study the principles stated here first, then use them to adapt the writing lessons of theirs so as to enhance communication among students and also to make sure that their students are well-supported with necessary language for the hard work of writing. Only then will writing be a powerful and effective tool for those who do not have opportunities to practice speaking to use in pursuing the aim of using English as a means of communication.
Preferences

Books


Articles:


Course books


**Online resources**

Introductory Page of the Website of Summer Institute of Linguistics International. (1999). *What are writing skills?* Available from:


Tan, H. (2012). *What is Writing and Why is There a Need to Learn it?*. Available from:

Appendix

Sample lesson plans designed under the combined/balanced approach

Tiếng Anh 10 - Unit 8

I. Objectives: After finishing this lesson, students will
- learn more vocabulary about showing directions.
- be able to write a letter to help someone find a certain place on a provided map.

II. Procedures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Warm-up (5’)</td>
<td>*Matching game&lt;br&gt;- T shows some symbols which show directions and some phrases.&lt;br&gt;- Ss work in group to match the signs with the phrases.&lt;br&gt;- Ss write their answers on the group board and stick them on the black board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- T corrects and gives comments when necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Pre-writing</td>
<td>Step 1:&lt;br&gt;- T asks Ss to look at the letter in the book and underline any words or phrases which show directions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25’)</td>
<td>- T asks Ss to working in groups, using the underlined phrases to find the target house on the map.&lt;br&gt;- T asks Ss to call out the answer and corrects it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 2:
- T gives explanations on the structure of the letter.

Step 3:
- T asks each group to choose a letter on the map.
- Each group, one by one, is given a set of signs which they use to put in the correct order to show the direction from the railway station to the target house.
- The members have to stand in front of the class in that order.
- The time allotted for this is 2 minutes per group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. While-writing (10’’)</th>
<th>- Each student chooses a letter on the map as their home and writes a short letter to anyone in the class to show the directions to that.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 4. Post-writing (9’’)   | - T asks Ss to exchange their letters with the partner next to them.  
- Ss discuss in pairs to help correct the letters.  
- After that, T collects all the final drafts home and marks. |
| 5. Homework (1’’)       | Ss learn the words and prepare Language focus part for the next lesson.                                                           |

Tiếng Anh 11 – Unit 2

I. Objectives: After finishing this lesson, students will:
- be able to write about a memorable past experience.
- use past tenses appropriately in telling story.
- gain experience from past events.

**II. Procedures:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Warm-up (5’) | - Teacher (T) divides class into about 6 – 8 groups (this depends on the number of students) and delivers group boards.  
  - T sticks 3 pictures of some people, who are happy, sad and embarrassed, on the board.  
  - T asks Ss to work in groups and discuss the reasons why the people in the pictures feel so.  
  - T asks some Ss for their opinions and gives comments:  
    + **People are happy because:**  
      * they are successful  
      * they can help others  
      * they are given something  
    + **People are sad because:**  
      * they fail  
      * they lose something or someone  
    + **People are embarrassed because:**  
      * they are not good enough  
      * they do something ridiculous  
      * they are inferior to someone |

2. Pre-writing (20’)  

**Step 1**  
- T delivers handouts.  
- T asks Ss to read the story in the handouts and do Task 1.  
- T calls some Ss for their opinions.  
- T explains some key words in telling a story: *setting, conflict, climax, denouement/resolution, ending* and tells Ss to do Task 2.  
  Keys:  
  1. introduction, 2. setting, 3. conflict, 4. climax, 5. denouement/resolution, 6. ending, 7. conclusion  

**Step 2**  
- T asks Ss to think about one of their most memorable past experiences, either a sad or happy or embarrassing one, and its reason. Then Ss jots down some events related to it.  
- For those who don’t have any story to tell, T asks them to choose one of the three kinds mentioned in Warm-up.  

**Step 3**  
- T introduces the diagram below and explains how it works. (T should remind students of the order of time when they write a story.)
- T asks Ss: What different tenses are used in stories…
  + to set the scene
  + for events that happen one after the other?
  + to refer to an earlier time in the story?

**Step 4**
- Ss work in groups doing Task 3.
- T asks some Ss to read the story with the correct answers.
  *Keys: 1-was walking, 2-met, 3-hadn’t met, 4-ran, 5-went*

**Step 5**
- T checks whether Ss understand all the words / phrases suggested in Task 4.
- Ss work pairs doing Task 4.
- T invites some Ss to write on the board. → T corrects.
  *Keys: 1-suddenly, 2-while, 3-finally, 4-then, next, after that*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. While-writing (15’)</th>
<th>- Each student writes a short letter to anyone in the class to tell them about the one of their memorable memories.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 4. Post-writing (9’)   | - T asks Ss to exchange their letters with the partner next to them.
  - Ss discuss in pairs to help correct the letters.
  - After that, T collects all the final drafts home and marks. |
| 5. Homework (1’)       | Ss learn the words and prepare Language focus part for the next lesson. |

**HANDOUT FOR UNIT 2**

**Task 1.** Read the story below and explain why the boy felt happy.
Task 2. Read the story again and match the headings with the correct numbers.
- denouement/resolution
- ending of the story
- conclusion
- introduction
- climax
- conflict
- setting

Task 3. Work in groups. Complete the first part of the story by choosing using the correct tense.

While I (1) was walking / walked / had walked down the street the other day, I (2) was meeting / met / had met an old friend what I (3) wasn’t seeing / didn’t see / hadn’t seen for a long time. I (4) was running / ran / had run across the street to greet her and then we (5) were going / went / had gone to a coffee shop together to have a chat.

Task 4. Use the words or phrases suggested to connect the sentences.

suddenly – slowly – gradually – immediately – next – then – after that – finally - while - when

1. I was walking in the park / I saw a big dog run across the path

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
2. I saw a dark figure / I was watching the moon

3. I ran as fast as I could / I arrived at home

4. First, I opened the door / I walked into the room

Task 5. Write a letter to a pen pal to tell about one of your most memorable past experiences.

Begin the letter like this:

Dear ....,

Remember what I promised last time? Yeah! The story!
In this letter I am going to tell you about one of my...

---

Tiếng Anh 12 – Unit 6

I. Objectives: After finishing this lesson, students will be able to:
- know how to write a letter of application
- know the importance of writing a letter of application when applying for a job

II. Procedures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Warm-up (5’)</td>
<td>*Game: “Put them in order”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Pre-writing
(39’)

Step 1
- T asks, “In your opinion, which is the most important step?”
- T calls some Ss to answer.
- Possible answers:
a. “Go to the interview” => “Yeah, I also think it’s very important. But do you think we should do another important thing before going to an interview? Write a letter of application, for example?”
b. “Write a letter of application” => “OK. It’s very important, isn’t it? So, today we are going to learn how to write this kind of letter.”

Step 2
- T gives each S a handout.
- T asks Ss to read the sample letter in the handout and work in pairs to match each paragraph with the main idea it contains.
- T writes on the board copies of the phrases in the handout.
- After Ss have been working for 5 minutes, T calls some Ss to go to the board and match the paragraphs with the main ideas.
- T corrects.
- T then explains how a simple letter of application is organized.

Step 3
- T gives each group a large copy of the table in Task 2.
- Ss work in groups to fill in the table with information from the sample letter.
- After 5 minutes, Ss exchange their answers with other groups.
- T draws the table on the board and asks some Ss to give answers.
- T corrects.
- Answers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Type of job</th>
<th>teaching assistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Level of education</td>
<td>university (student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reason(s) for applying</td>
<td>put knowledge in use, get more experience, work with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interests / character</td>
<td>love for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Additional information (qualification, skills)</td>
<td>teaching skill, IELTS 6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 4
- Ss work in pairs in 4 minutes to put the statements into their correct purpose-
columns.
- T sticks ten numbered-cards on the board and asks some Ss to choose the cards.
- On the other side of each card there is a number (numbers from 1 to 10), the S
who is called has to decide where to put the statement.
- **Answers:**

**You have heard about the job from an advertisement.**
5. I would like to apply for the post of secretary advertised in today’s Thanh Nien
News.
9. I’m writing to apply for the job of typist advertised in Sunday News.

**You mention your skills and abilities.**
4. I’m a caring person and I also love children much.
8. I am 19 years of age, and have had one year’s experience in guiding tourists
visiting my hometown.

**You mention your résumé and other documentation attached.**
2. Enclosed please find a résumé and a photo.
10. Along with the letter, I send my CV and photo.

**You indicate your expected salary.**
1. The salary I should require would be 2,000,000 VND as a start.
6. I want 1,500,000 VND for my first month as a babysitter.

**You indicate what you are hoping.**
3. I’m ready for any interview in the next three weeks.
7. I would appreciate it very much if you offer me an interview.

**Step 6**
- Ss work in four groups as divided at the beginning of the lesson to classify the
statements into “Formal” and “Informal” Groups.
- T gives each group two cards printed “Formal” and “Informal”.
- T reads the statements randomly; after each time, the groups raise the
appropriate card.
- T can call some Ss to explain their recognition of the styles.
- **Answers:**
  + Formal: ① ② ⑤ ⑦ ⑧
  + Informal: ③ ④ ⑥ ⑨ ⑩
- **Recognition:**
  + I would like... vs. I want...
  + I am... vs. I’m...
  + simple sentences vs. complex sentences
  + ...

**Step 7**
Each student chooses one of the job advertisements in the handout and put their
ideas into organization to prepare for the application letter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. While-writing</td>
<td>Students finish their writing at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Post-writing</td>
<td>T collects all the pieces of writing home, corrects and returns them to Ss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Homework (1’)</td>
<td>Ss learn the words and prepare Language focus part for the next lesson.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HANDOUT FOR UNIT 12

Task 1. Work in pairs. Read the letter of application below and match each paragraph with the main idea(s) it contains.

Ms Huyen Nguyen
HR Manager
Vietnam USA Society English Centers
9th Floor, 189 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai
District 1, Ho Chi Minh City
12 April 2012

Dear Ms Huyen Nguyen,

I am writing to apply for the post of teaching assistant advertised in the Saigon Evening News of 10 April; please find attached a copy of my CV for your consideration.

I am currently a third-year student majoring in TESOL of Saigon University and I hope to put my knowledge to use in real teaching.

I have been learning many things about English language teaching as well as students’ psychology. I am particularly interested in your post as it could bring me more experience in teaching English and
opportunity to work with children. In addition to my teaching skill and love for children, I have an IELTS of 7.5, which, I think, would be a plus for the post.

I look forward to hearing from you and wish to have an appointment for an interview in the next three weeks.

Yours sincerely,

Tran Thanh Vu
Enc. CV

---

**Task 2. Work in groups.** Read the letter again and fill in the table with suitable information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Type of job</th>
<th>teaching assistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Level of education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reason(s) for applying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interests / character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Additional information (qualification, skills)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Task 3. Work in pairs.** Below are some commonly-used statements a letter of application. Each two of them are written for one purpose. Put them in the correct column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You have heard about the job from an advertisement.</th>
<th>You mention your skills and abilities.</th>
<th>You mention your résumé and other documentation attached.</th>
<th>You indicate your expected salary.</th>
<th>You indicate what you are hoping.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. The salary I should require would be 2,000,000 VND as a start.
2. Enclosed please find a résumé and a photo.
3. I’m ready for any interview in the next three weeks.
4. I’m a caring person and I also love children much.
5. I would like to apply for the post of secretary advertised in today’s Thanh Nien News.
6. I want 1,500,000 VND for my first month as a babysitter.
7. I would appreciate it very much if you offer me an interview.
8. I am 19 years of age, and have had one year’s experience in guiding tourists visiting my hometown.
9. I’m writing to apply for the job of typist advertised in Sunday News.
10. Along with the letter, I send my CV and photo.
Task 4. Work in groups. The statements in Task 3 are written in two styles: formal and informal. Classify them and explain your classification.

Formal: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩
Informal: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

Task 5. Write a letter of application for one of the jobs below.