Using WebQuests and Electronic Journals to Cultivate Writing Skills

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Tertiary-level students in the UAE, particularly those on foundations courses, often find producing written texts in English (L2) quite challenging. One obvious reason for this is the students' limited linguistic knowledge of L2. Another less obvious reason is the inability of students to generate their own ideas and produce real writing based on these ideas; in other words, they have difficulty with the processes involved in producing a piece of writing. It is therefore important that students are encouraged to understand the actual process of writing, which should enable them to produce better L2 written texts.

However, an exclusive use of the process approach to L2 writing with students on foundations courses, many of whom have weak L2 skills, is not realistic for two main reasons. First, the students have just entered tertiary education from an exam-driven secondary school system where L2 writing activities have traditionally followed the product approach. Secondly, even when writing in L1 (Arabic), many students find the process of drafting, editing and finally publishing their text very difficult (Cozens & Knowling, 2008).

This paper examines the design and use of L2 writing activities built around WebQuests and electronic journals in a task-based, product/process hybrid approach to L2 writing. First, the paper outlines three approaches to writing: product, process, and task-based hybrid. This is followed by a description of WebQuests and electronic journals. Next, Gagné’s (1985) theory of instruction, an instructional design methodology which can be used in the materials design process, is briefly discussed. Finally, there will be a detailed description of how I have designed and used writing activities incorporating WebQuests and electronic journals with my students. This discussion will focus on how the activities help students not only improve their L2 linguistic knowledge, but also allow them to better understand the process of writing, cultivating their writing skills as a result.

**Product, Process and Task-Based/Hybrid Approaches to L2 Writing**

Depending on the academic setting, L2 students are usually exposed to two main approaches when doing writing activities. Traditionally, the first is the product approach. Here, students are provided with models containing appropriate vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices. They are then expected to produce similar features in their own written texts and are judged accordingly. The role of teachers is to judge written texts, spot errors, and provide correction as needed (Tribble, 1996). Consequently, successful writing is about showing linguistic knowledge to an examiner (Yang, 2005); the end product is important, not the process of getting there, and there is “little awareness of the reader beyond the teacher-examiner” (Hyland, 2002, p. 7).

As a result of the perceived limitations of the product approach, the process approach appeared in the mid-1970s. This approach focuses on the writer and places emphasis on the “processes used to create texts” (Hyland, 2002, p. 6). It reflects the cyclical nature of writing, in which students move from “the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the ‘publication’ of a finished text” (Tribble, 1996, p. 37). In this approach, the teacher’s role expands to that of a “facilitator” (Dyer, 1996, p. 313; Yang, 2005), helping students through a non-linear process of prewriting, composing/drafting/revising, editing and finally publishing (Tribble, 1996, p. 39).

However, research in the 1980s raised questions about the process approach. According to Horowitz (1986a), the process approach failed to prepare students for specific academic writing tasks. Swales (1987) also suggested that there should be less emphasis on the cognitive
processes occurring inside the writer and more emphasis on how writers interact with their intended audiences. These concerns led to the development of language tasks, i.e. “the tasks second-language learners need to master to survive in academic communities” (Dyer, 1996, p. 313), and the adoption of writing instruction that is a “task-specific, process/product hybrid” (p. 316). To deliver this task-based, hybrid approach, I have found that using writing activities incorporating WebQuests and electronic journals is particularly effective.

**WebQuests and Electronic Journals**

The term WebQuest was first used by Bernie Dodge in 1995. According to Dodge (2001), a WebQuest is

> an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web. WebQuests are designed to use learners' time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it, and to support learners' thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. (p. 7)

Dodge (2007) also states that a WebQuest should be “wrapped around a do-able and interesting task that is ideally a scaled down version of things that adults do as citizens or workers.” Therefore, if WebQuests are used correctly in L2 writing activities, students can be provided with task-based learning opportunities which expose them to the techniques of collecting data, and which can help improve their own process-writing skills.

Journals have been kept by writers for centuries. With the embrace of the process approach to writing by the EFL world in the 1980s, journals became a key element of L2 writing activities (Murdoch, 2008). According to Murdoch, journal-based writing activities focus less on error correction and more “on the content of the journal and the quality of interaction between student and teacher” (p. 326). However, journal writing can often be a “solitary pursuit” (Todd, Mills, Palard, & Khamchareon, 2001, p. 354), with little or no interaction between the student and teacher. The use of electronic journals, in the form of Weblogs, online discussion forums or digital storybooks, allows writers “to develop and share personal stories and community histories” (massIMPACT, 2003) with a larger audience, such as classmates or the wider discourse communities accessing the Internet. As students are aware that the audience is larger and more authentic, the writing process is reinvigorated (Bray & Johnson, 2008). Thus, using electronic journals as part of L2 writing activities can be a useful way to enhance the writing process.

However, WebQuests and electronic journals should be integrated carefully into L2 writing activities. To do this, using a design framework such as Gagné’s (1985) theory of instruction is invaluable.

**Gagné’s Theory of Instruction**

In his book *The Conditions of Learning* (1985), Gagné first outlined his theory of instruction. This theory is based on the “[cognitive] information processing model of the mental events that occur when adults are presented with various stimuli” (Kruse, n.d.). According to Driscoll (1994), the theory can be broken into three major areas: the taxonomy of learning outcomes, the conditions of learning, and the events of instruction. He defines these three areas as follows:

**Taxonomy of learning outcomes:** Gagné stated that learning outcomes could be broken into five categories (information, intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, attitudes, and motor skills) and that each category resulted in different classes of human performance.
The conditions of learning: Gagné breaks these down into internal and external conditions. Internal conditions relate to what learners know prior to instruction. External conditions deal with the stimuli, or instruction, given to learners.

The nine events of instruction: These nine events (Table 1) allow the theory to be put into practice and give educators a framework by which to design learning materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Event</th>
<th>Internal Mental Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Gain attention</td>
<td>Stimuli activates receptors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Inform learners of objectives</td>
<td>Creates level of expectation for learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Stimulate recall of prior learning</td>
<td>Retrieval and activation of short-term memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Present the content</td>
<td>Selective perception of content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Provide ‘learning guidance’</td>
<td>Semantic encoding for storage long-term memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Elicit performance (practice)</td>
<td>Responds to questions to enhance encoding and verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Provide feedback</td>
<td>Reinforcement and assessment of correct performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Assess performance</td>
<td>Retrieval and reinforcement of content as final evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Enhance retention and transfer to the</td>
<td>Retrieval and generalization of learned skill to new situation</td>
</tr>
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The remainder of the paper describes how Gagné's nine events of instruction were applied to a series of L2 writing activities incorporating WebQuests and electronic journals that follow a task-based, process/product approach to writing.

The Students

The majority of students entering the Foundations Programme at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) are recent graduates from high school. As their English and other academic abilities are not yet sufficient for tertiary level study, they take a one-year foundations course in English. The materials discussed in this paper were designed for the lower-proficiency Foundations students.

The Learning Problems

Diploma Foundations students commonly find it difficult to complete L2 writing activities which require them to generate ideas, collect data, and produce a finished piece of writing integrating these ideas and data. There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, they enter the foundations year straight from secondary education where they may have relied on teachers supplying the ‘right’ answers necessary to pass their exams, both in L1 and L2. This may lead to difficulties when doing writing activities that use the non-linear process approach. Students are often quite content to copy everything that is written on the board, but less able to write down their own ideas. In addition, as well as having poor process writing skills, students’ linguistic
knowledge is weak. Finally, the materials used in the classroom may not relate to students real-world experiences; hence they can find it difficult to generate ideas from the materials.

The Three Main Design Issues

To address the above problems, three solutions were identified which were then built into the materials design.

1. Build learning materials around familiar topics

Prior knowledge of topics makes idea generation easier for students. However, many foundations-level students in the UAE “have limited prior knowledge … in many fields and subject matters that we might assume would have been acquired in an average high-school background” (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2008, p. 17). This is particularly the case in an English class where internationally published textbooks and materials may deal with issues that are not relevant to the region. Even if students have adequate linguistic knowledge, they may lack the cultural cues necessary for text comprehension. To overcome this, materials were built around themes from the local context. Students were likely to have prior knowledge of these themes, so the cognitive load would be decreased, and the activities could focus on improving students’ L2 writing skills. In 2008, Emiratis were being asked by their leaders to consider national identity. The Sharjah Colleges at HCT also encouraged teachers to use learning materials focusing on Emirati national identity and the theme of our annual exhibition, Mosaic, for 2009 was ‘Proudly Emirati.’ Therefore, I decided that this would be the theme for the learning materials and picked topics, such as UAE people, places, clothing, food, and animals that were familiar to students (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The index page icons

2. Provide students with authentic, task-based learning opportunities

As foundations students often come from an exam-driven, product-oriented secondary education system, it is often easier for educators to provide them with similar learning opportunities. As a result, learning activities are too often built around exam practice. However, in order to give our students more processing skills necessary for their future studies and careers, we need to provide them with more authentic, task-based learning opportunities. It was therefore necessary to build materials around authentic academic writing tasks. There are a number of different writing tasks (Horowitz, 1986b, lists seven), but most “emphasize recognition and reorganization of data and de-emphasize invention and personal discovery” (Horowitz, 1986b, cited in Dyer, 1996, p. 313). In other words, tasks require students to find relevant data and use this data in their own texts. Using WebQuests is ideal to recreate this type of task.

3. Combine product and process approaches to writing

The transition from the mainly product-oriented UAE secondary education system to a more process-oriented tertiary education system is difficult for students, particularly those who are
academically weak (Glasgow & Fitze, 2008, p. 194). My students, who are lower foundations level, fit this profile. Therefore, it was necessary to design materials that combined product and process approaches to L2 writing and gave students opportunities to improve their process-writing and linguistic skills. In addition, at least one semester would be needed to achieve this, so eight modules of materials would be required (Figure 1). Each module would be completed over a two-hour period and would focus on improving students' process writing skills. The modules were to be done at two-week intervals. During this two-week interval, students would do activities aimed at developing their L2 linguistic knowledge in problem areas identified through their work in the previous module. Hence the writing activities would contain a product/process hybrid approach.

Having identified the student learning problems and possible solutions to these problems, the detailed design of the modules was started. As the materials would feature WebQuests and electronic journals, it was logical to create online, interactive materials accessed via Blackboard Vista (a learning management system). The first seven modules contained an introduction, a picture-matching activity, one or two WebQuests with a controlled writing activity and one WebQuest with a freer writing activity to be done in students' electronic journals. The last module then required students to produce a text, with limited online guidance, about their own emirate in the UAE.

Nine Events of Instruction

In order to achieve the most effective materials, Gagné's (1985) nine events of instruction (Table 1 above) were closely adhered to. This ensured that all stages of the learning process were covered by the materials.

Event 1 - gain attention: To gain students' attention, some iconic symbols of the UAE, such as Sheikh Zayed and the Burj Al Arab (Figure 1), were used. In addition, before going to the learning module, students were asked questions about the icon representing the module.

Event 2 - inform learners of objectives: This was done on the index page and the first page of each module (Figures 2 and 3). As students were unfamiliar with process writing, it was important to show them exactly what was being done and why.

Figure 2. Index page introduction

Figure 3. Module introduction
Event 3 - stimulate recall of prior learning: A picture-matching activity in each module (Figure 4) helped students associate new information with prior knowledge. These activities were part of the pre-writing stage of the writing process. To make this stage more effective, class discussions were also held about the pictures to further stimulate recall of prior knowledge related to the topics on which students would write.

Figure 4. A picture-matching activity

Event 4 - present the content: Content was presented in manageable chunks to facilitate learning. In Figure 5, two short, related activities were presented. These activities were part of a WebQuest. Students did a series of tasks in which they found information on the internet and, more importantly, used this information to complete a paragraph. These activities were thus replicating an authentic use of the internet.
Event 5 - provide ‘learning guidance’: The final objective of each module was to have students produce texts about a topic. The activities in Figure 5 above provided learning guidance so that the final goal was achieved satisfactorily. Activity 1 guided students to find information on the internet. Activity 2 guided them on how to use this information to produce a written text. It is important to note that at this stage students were not being asked to write a paragraph, only do a gap-fill using information found on the internet. Thus, product and process approaches to writing were being used: an almost complete model text was being supplied (for future reference), but students needed to use process-writing skills to complete the model.

Event 6 - elicit performance (practice): Having done the above activities, students moved on to the next activity where they put into practice the techniques that they had just learned. In the example (Figure 6), students did three activities, this time related to Abu Dhabi. Activity 1 was to the one they had completed about Dubai, but activity 2 was a freer writing activity. This free writing activity was done in the students’ electronic journals. There were a number of electronic journals available, but I decided on using Microsoft OneNote for a number of reasons. First, using OneNote makes organising, updating and reviewing work easy for students. Second, navigation around OneNote is simple so students’ work can be monitored and comments can be added very easily. Finally, each student’s OneNote folder can be read by all the other students in the class; hence, students’ work can be made accessible to a wider audience.
Event 7 - provide feedback: Feedback was in two forms: self-check (for example, activities 1 and 2 in Figure 5), and teacher feedback on the writing produced (for example, activity 2 in Figure 6). The journal writing was done in class, so I was able to provide students with two forms of feedback: the first was individual feedback; the second was class feedback. The aim of the individual feedback was not to correct all mistakes made by students, but to make
them more aware of the cyclical nature of writing. My role was that of facilitator, helping students through the non-linear process of drafting, editing and finally publishing their text. The aim of the class feedback, done at a later date, was to improve students’ L2 linguistic knowledge. By working closely with students at the drafting stage, common problem areas, which were mainly grammatical, could be identified. These problems were then addressed in class using more traditional, product-based approaches to writing. For example, in the above texts on Abu Dhabi, students were having problems using the referential pronoun ‘it.’ Rather than interrupt the class at the writing stage, the use of referential pronouns was covered in a later class. Materials to be used later were also modified to provide students with better learning guidance. Thus the feedback stage contained elements of both product and process approaches to writing.

Event 8 - assess performance: The final module in the materials, My Emirate, was used to assess the skills acquired by students. In this module (Figure 8), learning guidance was limited. Students were expected to find an appropriate site, extract information and images and then put these in their own text. The students featured in this paper were from a very low-level class, so the information to be extracted was specified and kept to a minimum. Higher-level students could be expected to find more information.

![Webquest - My Emirate](image)

**Figure 8. Assessing students performance – ‘My Emirate’**
Figure 9 shows samples of students’ work produced in the final module. Clearly, all three texts are very similar and formulaic. This is not surprising considering the low English proficiency of the students and the amount of guidance that they were given. However, the final texts do show an improvement in students’ L2 writing skills; students can combine a string of grammatically correct simple sentences into a short paragraph. Successful completion of the task demonstrates that students have the building blocks, basic linguistic knowledge and process writing skills, required to start producing the more complex written texts needed for their future studies.

**Event 9 - enhance retention and transfer to the job:** This perhaps cannot be judged at this early stage. Hopefully, when entering their specialized area of study, the skills acquired by doing the above materials may be transferred to students’ further studies.

On completion of the modules, students had eight pieces of L2 writing in their electronic journals (Figure 7). The texts were simple and formulaic, but the fact that students could produce these texts showed that their process writing skills and linguistic knowledge had improved. However, even though the journals could be (but were rarely) viewed by other class members, it was desirable to have students reinvigorate their texts by forcing them to expose their texts to a wider audience. As the materials were developed to support the Mosaic theme, ‘Proudly Emirati,’ and all classes were expected to produce a body of work to be displayed at the exhibition, students were asked to incorporate their texts into another form of electronic journal, a digital storybook (see Appendix). Once students realized that their texts were to be viewed by the entire college, the quality of the texts took on a greater importance. To make the task easier, students worked in groups of three, but each student was responsible for one topic. For example, one group worked on UAE cities, with each student being responsible for one text, either Sharjah, Ajman or Umm al-Quwain. As part of the task, students had to expand on the texts, find new images, reformat the texts and produce voiceovers for the texts. This extra activity also followed the task-based, product/process hybrid approach. Once again, the teacher acted as facilitator, helping students through drafting, editing and finally publishing their texts. In addition, as students were keenly aware of their new audience, they wanted grammatically perfect texts; therefore, error correction was provided accordingly. Adding voiceovers also proved to be a huge success as students now wanted to listen to and read the texts that their classmates had produced, thereby providing more learning opportunities for the students. (In fact, the finished digital storybook and related activities were used by a number of my colleagues with their own classes.) So by creating a larger audience and making students aware of this, students were able to transform static, somewhat pedestrian texts into dynamic, error-free, interactive texts.
Summary

Emirati students in the foundations year of tertiary education often find writing L2 texts very challenging since they lack the process-writing skills necessary to produce academic texts at an appropriate level. Therefore, it would seem logical to focus on activities that improve students’ process-writing skills. However, particularly for low-proficiency students, it is important to achieve a suitable balance between process and product approaches to L2 writing. One way to achieve this is by using a task-based, product/process hybrid when designing L2 writing activities.

Over the academic year 2008/2009, I designed a series of writing materials using this task-based, product/process hybrid approach based on a theme, ‘Proudly Emirati,’ familiar to students. These materials aimed to improve students’ L2 process-writing skills and linguistic knowledge. One key element of the materials was the use of WebQuests and electronic journals. WebQuests, when designed properly, were an ideal way to provide students with authentic, task-based learning opportunities. In addition, using electronic journals enhanced the writing process by allowing writers to reach a larger audience. Finally, to ensure that no vital stages in the learning process were left out, the materials were built around the framework of Gagné’s (1985) nine events of instruction. Using this framework, more detailed design was applied to the materials, thereby ensuring that an adequate number of product and process writing activities were included.

The materials were used over one semester. By the end of semester, students were producing texts that, although admittedly formulaic, did demonstrate adequate improvements in their L2 process writing skills and linguistic knowledge. The quality of texts was further improved by displaying them in a digital storybook, which was then viewed by a larger audience. Students’ awareness of this larger audience was the catalyst for further text improvements, and was perhaps the key element in cultivating writing skills.

In conclusion, using a task-based, product/process approach to L2 writing activities incorporating digital technologies such as WebQuests and electronic journals, appears to positively influence students’ written texts. However, as similar (or perhaps greater) improvements may be achieved using a product-only or process-only approach, it would be useful to run a comparative study of each approach to find the most effective balance between a focus on product, and a focus on process for students at different levels. Finally, care must be taken that learning activities are not using the technology just for its own sake. The activities must be carefully created using sound instructional design techniques such as Gagné’s (1985) theory of instruction, ensuring that no stages in the learning process are neglected and that interesting, and therefore motivating, learning opportunities are given to students.
References


