

## **Current State of the Teaching of Process Writing in EFL Classes: An Observational Study in the Last Two Years of Secondary School<sup>1</sup>**

**Estado actual de la enseñanza de la escritura como proceso en clases de inglés como lengua extranjera: Un estudio de observación en los dos últimos años de bachillerato**

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This study reports on the process writing activities carried out in EFL classes in the last two years of secondary school. Grades 10 and 11 in six Colombian high schools - three public and three private - were observed in order to determine the way process writing is taught, focusing especially on the planning, composing, and revising activities, and based on the understanding of writing as an activity with a process-oriented approach. The findings indicate that writing and also reading are product-oriented, and that class activities tend to place or emphasize listening and speaking over writing and reading. Most of the time was spent on oral exercises, drills, role-plays and pronunciation, being group work and role-play activities what students enjoyed most.

**Key words:** Observational study, EFL teaching, EFL in secondary school, writing process, process approach, qualitative research

Este estudio presenta las actividades de escritura realizadas en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera en los dos últimos grados de secundaria (10 y 11) de 6 colegios - tres públicos y tres privados. La observación se enfocó en la forma en que se enseña la escritura, especialmente en lo relacionado con las actividades de planeación, formulación y revisión con base en la concepción de la escritura como un proceso. Los resultados indican que la lectura y la escritura están orientadas hacia el producto, y que las clases privilegian la escucha y el habla sobre la lectura y la escritura. La mayor parte del tiempo se dedicó a ejercicios orales y escritos, juegos de roles y pronunciación, y los estudiantes disfrutaron más los trabajos en grupo y los juegos de roles.

**Palabras claves:** Estudio de observación, enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en escuela secundaria, procesos de escritura, enfoque sobre el proceso, investigación cualitativa

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<sup>1</sup> The findings reported here are based on my Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the University of Manchester at Manchester, England, in June, 2004.

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, an approach to writing which emphasised the process rather than the product began to be introduced into ESL classrooms (see Hedge, 1988). Raimes (1991: 422) has pointed out that there are parallels between a process writing pedagogy and communicative, task-based curriculum development. The approach essentially recognised that the production of a good piece of writing requires time, that it is a recursive process involving many sub-processes such as generating ideas, organising ideas, drafting, revising, and editing. It was seen to have potential where students needed to be able to produce written texts for assessment purposes i.e. in higher education but it was not seen to be so appropriate for foreign language classrooms, where more emphasis had to be given to oral production.

Reichelt (1999; 2001), writing from a US higher education context, has pointed out that there is no unified sense of purpose for writing within the foreign language curriculum. Foreign language students are usually not required to write in their L2 outside the classroom. In addition, foreign language teachers are uncertain about the role of writing in the FL classroom. In her 1999 survey, she found that articles on FL writing appeared in publications addressing FL professionals, suggesting that many of those engaged in FL writing research and pedagogy see themselves as primarily *language* teachers rather than *writing* teachers. She suggests that this offers evidence that FL writing is currently seen more as *foreign language* than *writing*.

This study was designed to be able to observe the kinds of instruction occurring within English classrooms in Bucaramanga, particularly focusing on whether process writing was used within those classrooms.

The following pages present the theoretical overview of the study - framed by the current professional literature vis-à-vis the role of process writing in FL contexts - followed by a description of the methodology and findings of the study.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON PROCESS WRITING

Stewart and Cheung (1989) showed that process writing could be successfully implemented in Hong Kong secondary schools if introduced gradually, with certain modifications and adaptations to address the constraints of the writing process in relation to the educational environment. Important recommendations (1989: 42-4) were the following:

1. Build up a shared understanding between teachers and learners of the nature, the purposes, and the requirements of the process approach.

2. Integrate the four language skills to fit into the stages of the writing process without unduly upsetting the timetable and the scheme of work.

3. Design purpose-specific and reader-specific tasks so that learners can draft and redraft with the communicative context in mind.

4. Simplify writing tasks by removing limitations on the number of words and the required language forms as well as ensure the familiarity of the subject matter.

5. Carry forward each stage in the writing process and focus on a different aspect of the writing process in each lesson, working on meaning before accuracy.

6. Allow sufficient time for learners to draft and redraft in order to discover and express their meaning appropriately and accurately, doing some activities in class and assigning others as homework.

7. Provide reader feedback from the teacher or peers, using peer reading and rewriting guidelines (distributed to all students) at each stage of the writing process to help students develop critical reading and revising skills.

8. Modify the teacher's role to be less of an evaluator or judge of language accuracy and more of a facilitator or consultant.

9. Grade the final draft according to how much progress the student has made in going from first ideas to drafting, revising, and editing.

Also, Pennington, et al. (1996), in analysing Hong Kong secondary school students' responses

to the introduction of process writing, revealed a complex pattern of cause-effect relationships between students' attitudes and teachers' behaviours. Of 8 classes taking part in the project, the two groups who found the experience positive were taught by a teacher who integrated elements of process writing into her teaching routine and who had displayed the most positive attitudes to process-oriented writing at the beginning of the project. The class that evaluated the experience most negatively was taught by a teacher who placed the focus on traditional language exercises and grammatical accuracy with very little attempt at integration, and who had been ambivalent about the new pedagogical approach at the beginning of the project. Sengupta & Falvey (1998), also working in Hong Kong secondary schools, reveal a picture of teacher practices which might accord with practices in FL classrooms elsewhere. Questionnaire, interview and observational data showed that the concept of process writing was restricted to an emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy.

Focusing on the relationship between explicit instruction of the writing process and gains in writing proficiency, Kern & Schultz (1992) report quantifiable improvement in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> semester argumentative essays in French as the result of a change of policy in the teaching of writing. The new teaching programme involved a "whole language" discourse-oriented course, highly integrated with the reading of texts and concentrating on the writing process as well as the final product. This whole-hearted policy change of approach contrasts with the findings of an experimental study in which Gallego De B. (1993) compared the post-treatment compositions of two groups of elementary level college students of Spanish. The experimental group outperformed the control group in their improvement on composition length and quality of organisation but the groups made equal gains in content, language use, syntactic complexity and error reduction.

### **Research on Pre-writing, Generating Ideas, and Planning**

Only a small number of studies have focused on these sub-processes in an instructional context. Reichelt (2001) reports a study by Becker (1991) which found that adult learners of German who used associative brainstorming for five minutes before writing produced compositions with more imagery and interesting ideas than the control group. The effect was particularly strong for the novices.

It is not clear, however, which language the learners used for the brainstorming, a question investigated by the two following studies. Friedlander's study of 28 Chinese writers (1990) had shown that students produced better L2 essays on an L1-related topic when allowed to plan in L1 and, conversely, produced better L2 essays on an L2-related topic when allowed to plan in L2. Lally (2000) wished to test the effects when students of French were asked to compose on language-neutral topics, a more likely situation in classrooms and examinations. In a small-scale study of 12 4<sup>th</sup> semester undergraduates, Lally compared the effects of generating ideas in L1 (English) and L2 (French) over the course of the semester (10 compositions). She found very little difference between the two conditions in terms of vocabulary or expression but L1 pre-writing activities produced better scores for organisation and global impression, although the difference was not statistically significant. This confirmed Friedlander's (1990) finding that L1 pre-writing activities facilitate organisation and coherence and Lally suggests that this practice may be advantageous for beginning or intermediate FL students. However, Akyel (1994) found that planning in L1 had a negative effect on the L2 texts of Turkish beginners in English who preferred to stay focused on the L2 to maximise its use.

Recent ESL/FL writing process research (Wooddall, 2002) suggests that switching between two languages can have beneficial effects for some learners particularly for higher level operations like planning. Wooddall recommends further studies

on classroom based writing to help students identify when and why they use their L1.

### Research on Drafting/Formulating

Little is known about the way that FL writers move between thought and language (L1 or L2) to produce a text. In process-oriented teaching, drafting is usually done silently by individuals, often outside the classroom. However, research on classroom activities which focus on reviewing drafts in order to improve them provides data which expose parts of the formulating process as it overlaps with reviewing processes.

The classroom equivalent of the think-aloud research technique is *collaborative talk* focused on various parts of the writing process, particularly on feedback by either the teacher or peers. Such activities allow for the explicit negotiation of meaning (Flower, 1994) in a non-threatening atmosphere, for the possibility of engaging in a dialogue between content and rhetorical concerns (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and for linguistic knowledge not available to the writer (to be supplied by a peer reader-listener).

However, the value of peer-feedback in ESL contexts has been questioned (Santos, 1992; Silva, 1993). There is concern about cultural and social differences between members of response groups (Carson & Nelson, 1994) but perhaps more commonly, there is the belief that students are not capable of detecting and correcting errors in L2 (Nelson & Murphy, 1993). This assumption that one type of feedback might be better than another has been replaced by acknowledgement that each type serves different purposes.

A study looking at peer feedback (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992), used an experimental design to compare the French products (2 essays) of 14 English-speaking student writers (intermediate) using an oral/aural procedure with those of a tightly-matched control group (16 students) who received only teacher's written feedback. One important finding was that the peer oral-revision group performed on a level equal to that of the control group.

Inevitably, good student feedback techniques depend on the teacher's own understanding and skill in the process. In relation to research in the area of teacher feedback, several topics have been explored: the effectiveness of grammar correction; different points of focus - error (vocabulary, grammar), content, organisation; the use of coding schemes; student corrections behaviours; teacher correction behaviours; negative vs. positive feedback; students' views on types of feedback; and the clarity of teacher feedback.

Kepner (1991) used an experimental design over a semester to identify types of written feedback/response which might be related to achievement and to low- or high-verbal ability in college intermediate FL Spanish writing. Two different types of written feedback to fortnightly assigned and graded journal writing were used: error correction and written message-related comments in Spanish. Grammatical accuracy and level of thinking were examined through journal entries. Students who received the message-related comments produced a significantly greater number of higher-level propositions in their post-treatment guided journal entries and did not produce significantly more errors than the students who received the error-corrections. Kepner concludes that error corrections and rule-reminders seem to serve neither to improve students' level of written accuracy in L2 surface skills nor to enhance the ideational quality of the writing whereas message-related feedback in the TL has the potential to facilitate writing development.

Many FL teachers nevertheless correct errors and use coding schemes to do so. Kubota (2001) explores students' use of a coding scheme in the context of teaching Japanese as a FL, using observation and the think-aloud technique. 63 informants coming from a range of language backgrounds e.g. English, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, all with a range of learning experiences, were used for the validation of a linguistically-based coding system. A smaller number of students, representing different learning experiences, participated in the think-aloud observation and

interview session. When the corrections made by all participants on receipt of coded feedback were analysed, a high success rate was found in terms of a decrease in all categories of error; in twelve of the fifteen categories this was statistically significant. The greatest improvements were made in missing words, particles and vocabulary. When the data from the think-aloud sessions were analysed with respect to these three categories, numerous different correction strategies were identified. The data also threw light on reasons why certain strategies were unsuccessful.

### Research on Revising

In a longitudinal study with a pedagogical stance, Sengupta (2000) monitored the effects of revision strategy instruction on two classes of 15-16-year-old L2 secondary school learners of English in Hong Kong, a context in which multiple drafting was rarely practised. The traditional practice of writing L2 compositions was replaced with multiple drafts of six compositions, with the support of direct instruction in revision after the first drafts had been completed. The students' performance was compared with that of a similar class who received no instruction in revision. The focus for teaching revision was on reader-friendliness, defined in terms of appropriateness, sufficiency and organisation of information. The responsibility for feedback moved gradually from the teacher to a peer, and finally, to the students themselves. A post-test composition at the end of the year showed that the two revising groups had made more progress than the traditionally taught group. Post experimental questionnaires and interviews showed the students appreciating much of what they had learned for the following two reasons: it had taught them about how teachers think and they felt it would help them to succeed in the Hong Kong examination system. There was evidence that the instruction had helped them to gain a new conception of what writing involved.

Much of the LI and SL research on revision has focused on the differences between skilled and

unskilled writers, finding that skilled writers are usually more aware of variables such as audience, topic and organisation and are more likely to make revisions at a global level (Hall, 1990; Zamel, 1983) while less skilled writers tend to make changes affecting surface-level features. Porte (1996), from a FL context, points out that very little research has addressed the reasons why the less skilled behave as they do. In two related studies (1996 and 1997), he first examined the revision strategies of 15 underachieving Spanish undergraduate students as they wrote four timed compositions (draft and final version) in English in contrived writing sessions in class, and then conducted semi-structured interviews with 71 students of the same type. The first study confirmed SL findings in that 80% of the revisions were local, mostly word-level; text-level revisions did occur but mainly in final rather than draft versions and more frequently where there was a 3-day gap between draft and final version. The second study focused particularly on the extent to which underachievers' observations about revision are affected by perceived teacher preferences in methodology, feedback and evaluation. The findings confirm those of the earlier study, to wit: revision was mainly regarded as a proofreading exercise; many participants commented on perceived negative aspects of the writing context (insufficient time, unhelpful composition topics); revision was perceived as important because it contributed to the final grade on the text but was also seen as a high-risk activity; few participants recalled any explicit instruction in revision apart from teacher indications of errors. The students themselves seemed to consider revision of content important but saw it as of lesser importance to the teachers. While Porte acknowledges that from this research it is impossible to claim a cause-effect relationship between perceived teacher preferences and revision behaviour, he argues that there is enough observed influence available from the data to suggest that we should be wary in describing what constitutes poor EFL writing and

prudent when designing all-purpose remedies for these ills. His work constitutes a plea to recognise the person - and context-specific nature of certain strategies, understanding that underachievers' perceptions may well be related to past learning experiences.

Summing up, this section has presented some research in second language writing processes and the foreign language writing process in particular. It offers evidence to support the idea that a process-oriented approach to L2 writing instruction can be successfully introduced to L2 learners. It has also looked at FL writing research on the three sub-processes, namely, planning, formulating, and revising.

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was both to determine the way EFL process writing is taught, focusing especially on planning, composing, and revising activities, and based on the understanding of writing as a process-oriented approach, as well as to find out the kinds of language instruction occurring in English classrooms in terms of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in order to examine the role of the writing process within the broader curriculum framework. This purpose was achieved through answering the following research questions:

1. How is process writing taught in EFL classes in the last two years of secondary school?
2. Are planning, composing, and revising activities carried out within the classroom?
3. What reading and writing activities are carried out in EFL classes in the last two years of secondary school?
4. What kinds of language instruction occur in EFL classrooms in terms of reading, writing, listening, and speaking?

The Colombian school system consists of primary school and high school. Primary school lasts for five years (grades 1 to 5) and high school for six years (grades 6 to 11). Children normally start primary school at the age of six or seven. Students must finish grade eleven to graduate and they must take the national examinations (Examen

de Estado) at the end of this grade to enter university. Based on the cumulative results of these examinations, the high schools in the country are classified as high level, medium level or low level.

In order to gain a picture of the current state of the teaching of L2 English process writing and reading in the last two years of secondary school, I carried out class observations in six high schools in Bucaramanga, Colombia. (Although this study focuses on process writing in EFL, reading activities were also observed and recorded as a point of reference to and comparison with the writing activities). These six schools were selected randomly from the total of schools that took part in "Examen de Estado" in Bucaramanga in August, 2000 – two schools, one public and one private, from each of the three examination levels mentioned above.

Table 1 presents the data for these six schools: the type of school (public or private), the school classification according to the national examination results, the grade observed, the number of pupils in the class, and the observation time.

All the schools teach three English periods a week. One 45-minute period was observed per grade (except in School 5 which has two 45-minute periods, one after the other), and the same teacher taught both grades ten and eleven. The English teachers held a bachelor degree in language teaching (Spanish, English, and French) and were between twenty and thirty years of age.

The data were collected by means of the instrument at Appendix 1, allowing the researcher to record the class activities, focusing especially on pre-writing/planning, writing/formulating and post-writing/revising activities, and also on pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities. Table 2 below shows which of these activities were carried out in each of the six schools observed.

### FINDINGS FROM THE OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH

Overall, the classes followed the same pattern which was correcting homework, introducing the

**Table 1.** Schools and grades observed.

School	Type	National Rating	Grade	Pupils	Observation Time
1	Public	High	10	30	45'
			11	38	45'
2	Private	High	10	34	50'
			11	28	35'
3	Public	Medium	10	33	45'
			11	32	45'
4	Private	Medium	10	31	45'
			11	32	45'
5	Public	Low	10	35	90'
			11	33	90'
6	Private	Low	10	36	45'
			11	38	45'

topic (mainly a grammar topic), explaining it, doing some drills, and setting the homework for the next class. In all the classes, Spanish was the medium of instruction. The students in the private schools used a textbook but the students in the public schools did not have one. There were no other materials or resources in any of the classrooms observed, although most schools had audio-visual facilities. The following pages describe the writing process and the reading class activities in L2 English at each of the six schools.

### School 1

This school (public, high rank) is reputed to be one of the best public schools in Bucaramanga. It is located near several main roads, but it is a quiet enclave in the middle of the city surrounded by trees. The classrooms are large enough for the

teacher to circulate easily. In the classes observed, L2 reading involved text coherence and L2 writing was used to write a dialogue.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade class, the teacher started by asking the students some general questions in English about how they were feeling, the date, and the time. Then he divided the class into small groups and gave each group a short text, a biography of Bill Gates, cut into five scrambled paragraphs and asked the students to unscramble them. I noticed that the first thing they did was to translate the text into Spanish, which took them most of the class time and then they started to unscramble the paragraphs. When they finished, the teacher asked some students to read the paragraphs in the sequence they thought was correct and he corrected pronunciation. When the answers were incorrect the teacher led the

**Table 2.** Record of reading and writing activities in L2.

Activities	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
Pre-reading			x			
Reading	x	x	x	x	x	x
Post-reading						
Pre-writing						
Writing	x		x	x		
Post-writing						

students towards the correct order. The students seemed to have had this kind of activity before for they did not ask any questions about the task procedure. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade class, after greeting the students in English, the teacher wrote a short dialogue on the board and asked two students to read it. Then he underlined the words 'can' and 'cannot' and asked some questions about their meanings and use. This grammar explanation ended with some drills on the board. After that, the teacher asked the students to write in groups a similar dialogue to that he had written on the board containing the verbs 'can' and 'cannot'. The teacher gave the instructions and asked the students to do it orally, first, and then write it down. When it was finished, they performed the dialogue before their classmates. As homework, the students were asked to write a description of their families based on a picture and bring it to the following class. Spanish was used most of the time in both classes. English was used when reading or writing a text in English. The students spoke very little English, mainly to answer yes/no questions or to respond to simple questions from the teacher. The grammar explanation was also in Spanish.

### School 2

This school (private, high rank) is located on the outskirts of Bucaramanga. It has plenty of outdoor space but the classrooms are small and the teacher cannot easily circulate. The L2 reading activities I saw were focused on text comprehension. There were no writing activities.

In the Grade 10 class, I observed that the whole period was spent on grammar explanation and drills. The teacher wrote some sentences in the active voice on the left side of the board and the same sentences in the passive voice on the right side. He asked the students what the difference was between both sets of sentences. A student finally gave an answer that satisfied the teacher who spent the remainder of the class explaining this grammar topic. At the end of the class, the teacher asked the students to do some exercises in the

book. All the explanation was done in Spanish. In the Grade 11 class, the teacher distributed a photocopied handout and had his students read a short text silently and individually. No directions or instructions were given. The students seemed surprised and did not know what to do with the text. Some started reading it aloud and the teacher corrected pronunciation. When they had finished, the teacher wrote some reading comprehension questions on the board and asked the students to answer them orally in groups and then put them in writing. The teacher circulated and gave some feedback to students. The answers were checked at the end of the class. The group work and the teacher's feedback were always in Spanish. It seemed to me that the teacher did not know what to do with the text he had given the students to read. I suspected that he created the reading comprehension questions while the students were reading and that the activity had especially been set up for me.

### School 3

This school (public, medium rank) is located in the city centre and the class I observed was in a classroom facing the street. The noise from outside was unbearable but students seemed to be used to it. As a consequence, the students and teachers had to speak very loudly, which increased the noise level. However, they somehow managed to teach and learn in this environment. In this school, reading was for comprehension, and writing involved re-writing a paragraph based on the teacher's feedback.

In the tenth grade class, reading activities aimed mainly to improve the students' reading comprehension and to practise pronunciation. The students were given a short text and read it and then one of them was asked to read it aloud for the class. The teacher corrected the pronunciation mistakes and asked them to answer the questions about the exercise. Some students worked alone and others joined in groups. They translated the reading and the questions into Spanish and seemed worried about the accuracy of the translation. The



teacher circulated and helped them translate. When the exercise was finished, the answers were corrected. After that, a grammar topic (present perfect) was introduced. In the Grade 11 class, the teacher gave the students back a piece of writing they had done at home some time before answering the question, 'If you were the president of Colombia, what would you do?' The teacher had already revised the texts and written some comments for the writer. The period was spent on revision which involved re-writing the text based on the teacher's feedback, which most of the students could not understand for it was in English. The teacher had to explain for every student, in Spanish, what the feedback was. I asked one of the students to let me read the feedback she had been given which was mainly general statements such as

*Nice paragraph. You would be a good president if you were elected. I would vote for you. Correct the spelling mistakes I have circled and check the verb tenses again.*

When the class finished, the teacher collected the papers.

#### School 4

This school (private, medium rank) is located in the city centre. The noise from the basketball court interfered with the class activities and it was difficult to understand what the teacher said. She asked the students to get closer to her because she could not speak louder.

The reading activities I observed in the tenth grade class aimed mainly to improve the students' reading comprehension. As a pre-reading activity, the teacher wrote the title of a text on the board and asked the students what they thought it was about. The answers were varied and the students answered in Spanish. Then, the teacher wrote some words from the text and asked the same question. She summarised the answers orally and wrote them on the board. The students were given a short text and read it and then some of them were asked to read it aloud for the class. The teacher corrected the pronunciation mistakes and asked them to compare

what they had said before about the content of the reading with the actual reading. As a final activity, they answered some questions in writing. When the exercise was finished, the answers were corrected. In the eleventh grade class I observed, the period was spent on grammar explanation. The topic was the past perfect. The teacher explained the topic in Spanish using a story from the textbook which narrated some events in the past in chronological order. Then she said she wanted them to narrate the same story but changing the order of the events. Students started doing it but with very little success, so she explained the grammar topic again in Spanish and provided some examples and then translated them into English. Some students seemed to have understood but the great majority seemed confused. As a final activity, they did some drills in the textbook on the past perfect.

#### School 5

This school (public, low rank) was located in a very deprived area of the city. The school building was in a very poor state but the students looked happy and good-humoured. In both grades observed, 10 and 11, Spanish and English teachers spent about 35 minutes at the beginning of the class praying and checking the attendance.

In this school, the students read aloud in English to improve pronunciation and to answer questions. Writing was almost non-existent.

The class in 10<sup>th</sup> grade was limited to reading aloud some paragraphs describing people. The teacher selected some students to read and corrected some pronunciation mistakes. The students repeated the word she had modelled for them. Then some words and sentences were translated into Spanish. Students interrupted very frequently to tell anecdotes or to describe some people they thought were worth talking about. The teacher followed them and encouraged them to continue describing famous people. However, very few students tried to do it in English and the teacher translated into English what was said in Spanish. The class finished abruptly when a representative

from the student's union asked the teacher to let the group attend a general meeting. The students did not wait for the teacher's approval and stormed out of the classroom. In the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the teacher did the writing herself on the board. She asked the students: "*What am I wearing today?*" The students started the description saying isolated sentences several at a time. The teacher did not control or select but picked up the sentences and wrote them up until the description was completed. She then asked one student to read one, corrected some pronunciation mistakes, and asked the class to repeat after her. The same pattern was repeated three times more. The teacher or the students themselves picked a classmate to stand before the class so s/he could be described. The teacher wrote the description on the board, underlining the verbs and asking the students why the verb was in that form and not in a different one. All the descriptions were done orally and mostly in Spanish. The students seemed to have enjoyed the activity, but at the end, they started joking and talking and seemed bored by the routine.

### School 6

This school (private, low rank) is located in a working-class neighbourhood. The building was a big old house which had been converted and seemed inappropriate for a school. The classrooms are small and there is a small playground in the backyard.

In this school, the reading I observed was mainly used to answer questions about a text and writing was non-existent.

The tenth grade class had a reading comprehension exercise at the beginning of the class. The activity was similar to those observed in other schools. The teacher asked the students to read a short text in the textbook. She picked some of them to read it aloud and corrected pronunciation mistakes, asking the whole class to repeat after her. Then she asked them to work in groups and answer the questions about the reading. The rest of the class was spent on grammar

explanation and doing some drills. In the eleventh grade class, the teacher told the students they were going to interview famous people. She gave each student a piece of paper giving them the name of the person they should pretend to be and divided the class into six groups. Each student passed to the front of the classroom and, in a mock interview, the students in the other groups had to ask Wh-questions in order to identify the celebrity. They seemed to enjoy the activity.

### Summary of Observational Findings

It is important first to note that these observations provide only a snapshot of the activities taking place in these schools in Spanish and English classrooms. Nevertheless, my own local knowledge leads me to suggest that had I been able to visit more classrooms or spend more time in these classrooms, the findings would not differ to any great extent.

In general, the English class gave priority to listening and speaking over writing and reading. Most of the time was spent on oral exercises, drills, role-plays and pronunciation. It was evident that the students enjoyed group work and role-plays very much.

Reading activities were more frequent than writing activities and were focused mainly on reading comprehension of short texts. Writing was done mainly at home which supports the idea that process-oriented writing is rarely done in class. However, on one occasion, there was time allotted for revision of a piece of writing, which suggests it is not alien to the English classroom. The writing of reports, summaries, and essays was not observed.

Process writing has been a very important and fruitful field in the teaching and researching of writing since the late 1980's. A vast quantity of literature exists about it and it has been one of the main issues in the ESL/EFL context. However, this study provides enough evidence to support the idea that process writing is still alien to the contexts where this study took place. Most significant,

perhaps this situation is a frequent one in the Colombian secondary school contexts which leads to setting up the recommendations below.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following pieces of research have special relevance for the Colombian L2 (English) classroom, paying special attention to unskilled writers.

Stewart and Cheung's (1989: 42-4) recommendations about introducing process writing in the FL classroom are important for this study for it is possible to imagine them being implemented in the Colombian L2 (English) classroom. It requires teachers willing to help the students improve their writing skills and students willing to learn more about writing, and careful preparation of both teachers and learners. Teachers' attitudes towards process-oriented programmes are crucial for the success of such implementation (Pennington et al., 1996). A very important point these recommendations make is that listening, speaking and reading skills are not neglected. On the contrary, there is a call for the integration of the four skills to fit into the stages of the writing process which suits the university course requirements as students are tested in these four abilities.

Research, e.g. Kern's & Schultz's (1992), has shown that explicit instruction on the writing process improves students' writing proficiency. A process-oriented programme does not exclude concentrating on the final product; they can be integrated (Kern & Schultz, 1992). The balance and intensity of these two programme orientations need to be addressed by a change of policy in the teaching of writing.

Research on planning in an instructional context, although small, shows that brainstorming, generating ideas, and pre-writing activities improve learners' performance. In the Colombian school context, where L1 (Spanish) is generally the means of instruction in the L2 classes, studies by Friedlander (1990), Guasch (1997), and Lally

(2000) are of great importance for they offer evidence to support the idea that allowing students to use the L1 during the planning stage can affect writing performance positively, in particular that of the novice writer.

In the Colombian context, drafting/formulating in L1 and L2 is generally carried out outside the classroom. Research on this sub-process shows the benefits of accomplishing this in the classroom and of using teacher and peer feedback but this implies teacher and student awareness and training. Colombian learners are used to teacher feedback which tends to focus mainly on linguistic accuracy but peer feedback seems to be almost non-existent. As the Colombian culture is highly oral, this is reflected in the language classroom. Oral peer feedback suits this characteristic of the Colombian learners and findings by Hedgcock & Lefkowitz (1992), which show that this kind of feedback can improve learners' performance. Also, peer feedback has been found to be incorporated in the final versions of pieces of writing (Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998). However, attention must be paid to the kind of peer feedback for there is the danger (Carson & Nelson, 1994) that students are not capable of detecting error in L2. Teacher's feedback can be improved by the use of a coding system (Kubota, 2001) and by paying more attention to content (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990).

As revision is mainly done outside class, research in this area is of importance to this study. Porte's (1996) study focusing on unskilled writers offers insights into learners' revision strategies and their awareness of the need for instruction in revision which can help them to gain a new conception of what writing involves.

Finally, a process-oriented approach to L2 writing instruction can be successfully introduced in secondary school or university. In order to be successful, it is necessary to raise awareness among teachers and learners about its benefits in improving writing, and careful preparation of both teachers and learners is needed. A process-oriented approach should lead towards a good

product. Planning, formulating, and revising sub-processes can be performed in the classroom and can contribute to improving learners' writing. Time is, however, an issue here.

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## APPENDIX I: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION INSTRUMENT

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of students: \_\_\_\_\_

Males: \_\_\_\_\_ Females: \_\_\_\_\_

	TIME														
TL															
TQ															
TR															
PA															
PV															
PR															
PW															
PRA															
PSA															
PWA															
SWA															
TRP															
S															
U															

TL: teacher describes, narrates, explains, directs

TQ: teacher questions

TR: teacher responds to pupil's respond

PA: pupil responds to teacher's question

PV: pupil volunteers information, comments,  
or questions

PR: pupil reads

PW: pupil writes

PRA: pre-reading activity

PSA: post-reading activity

PWA: pre-writing/planning activity

SWA: post-writing/revising activity

TRP: teacher revises pupil's work

S: silence

U: unclassifiable