

PROCESS AND PRODUCT APPROACHES TO EFL WRITING: INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES AMONG FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Writing is one of the most challenging productive skills for university-level EFL learners, and the choice of instructional approach plays a significant role in shaping writing outcomes. This study compares the process approach and the product approach in a first-year writing course at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam. A quasi-experimental design was employed over one semester with 68 students assigned to two intact classes. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests scored on an analytic rubric and a structured attitude questionnaire. The process group outperformed the product group on overall post-test writing quality with advantages concentrated in content development and text organization. Product-approach students demonstrated stronger early grammatical accuracy, but this advantage diminished by the end of the semester. No significant between-group differences were found in enjoyment or approach preference. The findings suggest that an integrated, sequenced model drawing on the strengths of both approaches is most appropriate for the provincial Vietnamese university context.

Keyword: process writing approach, product writing approach, EFL writing, first-year university students, Thai Nguyen University

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely acknowledged as one of the most demanding skills in foreign language acquisition. Unlike listening or reading, it requires learners to actively construct meaning through language - organizing ideas, selecting vocabulary, and applying grammatical knowledge in a coherent way. In EFL education at the university level, writing carries particular weight because it is closely tied to academic performance, critical thinking, and professional competence.

In Vietnamese universities, English writing has traditionally been taught through a focus on producing correct, well-formed texts that follow a given model - an approach broadly categorized as the product approach. While this method offers clarity and structure, it does not fully prepare students for writing tasks that require generating and developing original ideas over multiple drafts. The process approach treats writing as a multi-

stage activity of planning, drafting, and revising, which offers a stronger basis for developing these

skills. In EFL settings, however, it brings its own challenges: it takes more time, requires greater learner independence, and does not always match what students from teacher-directed educational backgrounds expect from a writing class.

Despite a growing body of research on both approaches in EFL contexts around the world, evidence from provincial Vietnamese universities remains limited. This study addresses that gap by comparing the two approaches across one academic semester in first-year writing classes at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. Two research questions guide the study:

(1). To what extent do process and product approaches differ in their effects on EFL university students' writing quality?

(2). How do students' attitudes toward writing instruction differ between the two approach conditions?

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 describes the methodology; Sections 4 and 5 present the results and discussion; Section 6 concludes with implications and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Writing Skill in EFL Contexts: Challenges and Importance*

Writing is often considered the most demanding of the four language skills because it requires simultaneous control of content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics (Harmer, 2004). In Vietnamese EFL classrooms, students frequently arrive at university with uneven writing preparation. Reading and grammar have historically received the most attention in secondary school curricula, while extended writing tasks have been given less time. As a result, many first-year students can spot grammatical mistakes but find it difficult to build an argument across paragraphs or revise a draft in any meaningful way. Writing teachers therefore face the challenge of developing both linguistic accuracy and higher-order composing skills within a limited number of class hours.

2.2. *The Product Approach to Writing*

The product approach treats the written text as a model to be studied and reproduced (Nunan, 1991). Students examine sample texts, analyze their structure and language, and write their own texts following similar patterns. This approach is straightforward to implement in large classes and gives lower-proficiency learners a clear target to aim for. Its main weakness, as Badger and White (2000) point out, is that focusing only on the final text leaves out the thinking and decision-making that happen during writing. Students who spend most of their time imitating models may produce grammatically acceptable texts but struggle to express and develop their own ideas - a gap that becomes harder to ignore as academic writing demands increase.

2.3. *The Process Approach to Writing*

The process approach has its roots in composition research from the 1970s and 1980s. Flower and Hayes (1981) described writing as a non-linear cognitive activity in which skilled writers move back and forth between planning, drafting, and

reviewing throughout the task. In EFL classrooms, the approach typically involves brainstorming before writing, producing rough drafts without worrying too much about accuracy at first, receiving feedback at intermediate stages, and making substantive revisions. White and Arndt (1991) found that process-based instruction improved both fluency and text organization over time. A common concern, however, is that the approach requires more time and a higher degree of learner independence than many EFL students - particularly those educated in teacher-fronted settings - are used to.

2.4. *Comparative Studies: Process and Product Approaches in EFL Contexts*

Atkinson (2003) argued that the debate between the two approaches had shifted toward finding ways to combine them, as each has clear strengths in different areas. Kepner (1991) found that feedback focused on content and meaning - a core feature of the process approach - helped students produce more developed ideas than feedback that focused only on correcting errors, which is more typical of the product approach.

Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) compared both approaches with Saudi Arabian university students over 12 weeks. Process-group students made greater gains in essay coherence and idea development, while product-group students scored higher on grammatical accuracy throughout the study. Hossain (2011) found similar results in a Bangladeshi EFL context: process-approach students wrote longer and more developed essays, while product-approach students made fewer surface-level errors per hundred words.

Hyland (2003) and Nguyen and Hudson (2010) reached similar conclusions in Asian university settings. In Vietnam specifically, Nguyen (2016) found that process-based instruction improved student motivation and text organization, but that the time required for multiple drafts was a practical barrier within a standard 45-contact-hour course. Graham and Sandmel (2011), reviewing 29 studies in a meta-analysis, confirmed a significant overall effect of process-based instruction ($d = 0.57$), though the benefits were stronger for students who already had a reasonable level of language proficiency - a point that is directly relevant to the first-year cohort at Thai Nguyen University. Taken together, the

literature suggests that neither approach is clearly better in all situations, and that outcomes depend on learner background, available time, and the specific writing skills being developed.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a quasi-experimental design to compare the writing outcomes and attitudes of students taught through either the process approach or the product approach over one academic semester. Two intact first-year English classes were assigned to one of the two conditions. Both classes followed the same general writing curriculum, completed the same four assignments, and were assessed using the same instruments.

3.1. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, located in Thai Nguyen Province, northern Vietnam. Thai Nguyen University is one of the largest regional universities in Vietnam, and most of its students come from non-urban areas, including mountainous provinces surrounding the city. The participants were 68 first-year students ($n = 34$ per class) enrolled in a compulsory English writing course in the first semester of the academic year. All were between 18 and 20 years old and had studied English for at least seven years before university, mainly in state secondary schools in Thai Nguyen and neighboring provinces. A placement test at the start of the semester confirmed that both classes had similar initial proficiency levels, with most students at around B1 on the CEFR scale. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Both classes were taught by the same instructor to reduce the effect of teacher differences.

3.2. Instructional Procedures

In Class A (process approach), each of the four major writing assignments followed a multi-stage cycle: individual brainstorming, a first draft submitted for non-graded peer and teacher feedback, revision focused on content and organization, and a final draft submitted for evaluation. Students were encouraged to make real changes across drafts rather than only fixing surface errors.

In Class B (product approach), each assignment began with analysis of one or two model texts of

the target genre. Classroom discussion focused on their structure, vocabulary, and rhetorical features. Students then wrote and submitted a single final draft for teacher feedback and grading, without going through a drafting-and-revision cycle.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Three instruments were used. A writing pre-test at the start of the semester asked students to write a short opinion essay; this established a baseline for both groups. A writing post-test at the end of the semester used a different prompt of similar difficulty. All essays were scored by two independent raters using an analytic rubric adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981), covering five dimensions: content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (20 points each; maximum total 100). Inter-rater reliability was calculated at Cohen's kappa = 0.81, indicating strong agreement.

A structured questionnaire given at the end of the semester assessed student attitudes across four areas: perceived improvement in writing, enjoyment of writing tasks, confidence in writing in English, and preference for the instructional approach used. Each area included five items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire was tested with a separate group of students not involved in the study and revised for clarity before use.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 26. Independent samples t-tests compared post-test and questionnaire scores between the two groups. Paired-samples t-tests assessed within-group improvement from pre-test to post-test. Cohen's d was calculated to measure practical significance. Open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed through thematic coding to add detail to the quantitative findings. The significance level was set at .05 for all tests.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Pre-test Equivalence and Overall Writing Gains

A pre-test t-test confirmed no significant difference between the two groups at the start of the semester ($t(66) = 0.31$, $p = .758$), confirming baseline equivalence. By the post-test, both groups

had improved. The process group (Class A) gained 14.2 points on average; the product group (Class B) gained 9.4 points. The between-group difference at post-test was statistically significant with a large effect size ($t(66) = 3.12, p = .003, d = 0.76$). Table 1 presents the group-level scores; Table 1b presents the between-group comparisons.

Group	n	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Mean Gain
Process (Class A)	34	58.4 (6.2)	72.6 (7.1)	+14.2
Product (Class B)	34	57.9 (6.0)	67.3 (6.8)	+9.4

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Writing Scores by Group (out of 100)

Comparison	t(66)	p	Cohen's d	Interpretation
Pre-test (A vs. B)	0.31	.758	—	No significant difference
Post-test (A vs. B)	3.12	.003	0.76	Significant; large effect

Table 1b. Between-Group t-test Comparisons at Pre-test and Post-test

4.2. Analytic Rubric Dimension Scores

Table 2 shows that the process group's overall advantage was concentrated in content ($t(66) = 3.47, p = .001$) and organization ($t(66) = 3.03, p = .004$). The two groups did not differ significantly on vocabulary ($p = .276$), language use ($p = .401$), or mechanics ($p = .824$). Portfolio analysis of the first two assignments also showed that the product group performed better on sentence-level grammatical accuracy in the early weeks — an advantage that narrowed over the course of the semester but did not disappear entirely by post-test.

Dimension (max 20 pts)	Process M (SD)	Product M (SD)	t(66)	p
Content	15.8 (2.9)	13.4 (2.8)	3.47	.001
Organization	14.9 (2.5)	13.1 (2.4)	3.03	.004

Dimension (max 20 pts)	Process M (SD)	Product M (SD)	t(66)	p
Vocabulary	13.6 (2.3)	13.0 (2.2)	1.10	.276
Language Use	14.1 (2.0)	13.7 (1.9)	0.85	.401
Mechanics	14.2 (1.9)	14.1 (1.8)	0.22	.824
Total	72.6 (7.1)	67.3 (6.8)	3.12	.003

Table 2. Post-test Analytic Rubric Scores by Dimension (each dimension out of 20)

4.3. Student Attitudes Toward Writing Instruction

Table 3 shows that Class A students rated their perceived improvement ($t(66) = 2.89, p = .005$) and confidence in writing ($t(66) = 2.64, p = .010$) significantly higher than Class B students. No significant differences were found on enjoyment of writing tasks ($p = .093$) or preference for the instructional approach ($p = .306$). The attitude gap between the two groups was therefore specific to how students assessed their own progress and confidence, rather than how much they enjoyed the class or preferred the method.

Questionnaire Dimension	Process M (SD)	Product M (SD)	t(66)	p
Perceived improvement	3.94 (0.77)	3.41 (0.74)	2.89	.005
Enjoyment of tasks	3.76 (0.59)	3.52 (0.57)	1.71	.093
Confidence in writing	3.87 (0.91)	3.30 (0.87)	2.64	.010
Preference for approach	3.65 (0.69)	3.48 (0.67)	1.03	.306

Table 3. Questionnaire Results by Dimension (5-point Likert scale, $n = 68$)

Open-ended responses added useful detail. About one-third of Class B students said they preferred working from models because it reduced uncertainty before writing: 'I feel more comfortable when I can see an example first. Without a model I am not sure if my ideas are correct.' Class A students more often described the revision cycle as helpful for understanding their

own mistakes: 'When I revise my writing, I learn more than when the teacher just corrects my mistakes. I understand why I made the mistake.'

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Higher-Order Writing Skills vs. Surface Accuracy

The process group's significant overall advantage ($d = 0.76$) was not evenly distributed across all rubric dimensions. It was specific to content and organization, with no significant differences on vocabulary, language use, or mechanics. This makes sense when considering what the two approaches actually ask students to do. In the process approach, working through multiple drafts gives students the opportunity to return to their ideas, reconsider them, and make improvements before the final text is submitted. Product-approach instruction does not offer this opportunity - students write once, and the focus is on getting the form right rather than developing the thinking behind the text.

The product group's stronger early accuracy is also easy to account for. Reading and analyzing well-written model texts before each assignment gives students exposure to correct sentence structures and useful vocabulary in context. This kind of input translates fairly directly into grammatical accuracy in students' own writing, at least in the short term. The process group caught up on surface-level dimensions by post-test, but this took the whole semester - which is slower than what model-based instruction achieves from the start. These findings are consistent with Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) and Hossain (2011), who observed the same pattern: process approaches lead to stronger higher-order writing over time, while product approaches build surface accuracy more quickly.

5.2. Attitudes, Confidence, and Learner Background

The fact that process-group students reported higher perceived improvement and writing confidence by the end of the semester is worth noting. Revising drafts and seeing concrete changes across versions appears to give students a clearer sense of their own progress - something that receiving a corrected final submission does not provide in the same way. Ferris (2003) makes a related point: when students are given the chance to respond to feedback and revise, they

develop a greater sense of control over their own writing.

The absence of significant differences in enjoyment ($p = .093$) and approach preference ($p = .306$) suggests that product-approach students were not notably less engaged or dissatisfied. The one-third of Class B students who explicitly preferred working from models were likely reflecting a learning orientation that is well documented in research on East Asian EFL students - a preference for clear structure and teacher guidance over open-ended exploration (Hyland, 2003). For students at Thai Nguyen University, most of whom have come through teacher-fronted secondary schooling, this preference is a real and practical factor that teachers need to take into account when designing writing courses.

5.3. Implications for Writing Pedagogy at Thai Nguyen University

The results suggest that neither approach alone is the right answer for first-year writing students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University. A curriculum based entirely on the product approach is likely to produce students who write grammatically but have difficulty developing and sustaining their own arguments - a gap that grows more visible as academic demands increase across the years of study. A curriculum based entirely on the process approach, without first giving students a clear sense of what academic writing looks like, may leave them uncertain about expectations and unable to make productive use of the revision cycle.

A more practical solution is to sequence the two approaches within the same course: start with model analysis and genre instruction in the early weeks to give students the structural knowledge they need, then gradually shift to process-based drafting and revision as that foundation is in place. Badger and White (2000) describe this as a genre-process approach, and the present findings support its relevance for the Vietnamese university context. How this kind of integrated model can be fitted within the contact hours available in a standard first-year course is a question that curriculum designers at Thai Nguyen University should address in concrete terms.

6. CONCLUSION

This study compared process and product approaches to writing instruction among 68 first-year students at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, over one academic semester. The process approach was associated with significantly higher overall post-test writing scores ($t(66) = 3.12, p = .003, d = 0.76$), driven by significant advantages in content development ($p = .001$) and text organization ($p = .004$). No significant differences were found on the three surface-level dimensions. Product-approach students showed stronger grammatical accuracy in the early part of the course, but this advantage narrowed by post-test. Process-group students also reported significantly higher perceived improvement ($p = .005$) and writing confidence ($p = .010$), while enjoyment and approach preference did not differ significantly between the two groups.

The findings add context-specific evidence to the comparative literature on writing instruction and point toward practical implications for teachers in provincial Vietnamese universities. Process-based instruction produces stronger gains in the writing skills that matter most for academic work - developing and organizing ideas - while product-approach elements help students build early accuracy and reduce uncertainty. A combined, sequenced model drawing on both traditions is likely to serve first-year EFL writing students most effectively.

This study has several limitations. The sample was from a single institution, which limits how far the findings can be generalized. Using one instructor for both groups controlled for teacher differences but also means the results are tied to one particular teaching style. Following students over more than one semester would help determine whether the advantages of process-based instruction carry through as writing demands increase. Future research with larger samples across multiple institutions would provide stronger evidence for the recommendations made here.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank the students and faculty at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, for their cooperation and participation in this study. Thanks are also due to

the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped improve this manuscript.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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