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AUTHOR Kitao, S. Kathleen; Saeki, Namie  
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ABSTRACT

Traditional approaches to teaching writing have been challenged, and new methods have emerged that reflect the new understanding of this process. This paper compares and contrasts product-based and process-based approaches to teaching writing. Product approaches reflect traditional, teacher-centered approaches to teaching in general, emphasizing an initiation-response-evaluation pattern of discourse between teachers and students. Process approaches view writing as a process that evolves through several stages as the writer discovers and molds meaning and adapts to the potential audience. A corollary to process approaches to writing is that writing is a social activity. However, in the typical writing class, students as responders have little opportunity to explore social roles through their writing. The dialogue journal (DJ) is a possible solution to the limitations of the classroom. A variation of DJs, secret friend journals (SFJs), is explored in a study with first year writing students at a college in Japan. SFJs share some advantages of teacher-student DJs and have additional advantages, for example, decreased demands on teachers' time and increased interest in the assignments due to the anonymity of a partner's identity. (Contains 18 references.) (JP)

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# Process and Social Aspects of Writing: Theory and Classroom Application

S. Kathleen Kitao  
Namie Saeki

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## Process and Social Aspects of Writing: Theory and Classroom Application

S. Kathleen Kitao  
Namie Saeki

Writing is considered the most difficult of the four basic language skills to master, both for first and for second language writers. Writing is an extremely complex activity requires the writer to control a wide variety of complex information, ranging from letter formation and spelling to rhetorical patterns. While virtually all children learn to speak and comprehend their native language, not all of them learn to write. Learning to speak and comprehend spoken language are naturally occurring processes. Writing, however, must be taught (White, 1981).

In recent years, teachers and researchers have gained a new understanding of the process of writing. Traditional approaches have been challenged, and new methods have emerged that reflect the new understanding of this process. In this paper, we will compare and contrast the two major types of approaches to the teaching of writing—the traditional product based approaches and the more recent process based approaches. We will discuss language as a social activity—an aspect of process approaches—and the advantages and disadvantages of dialogue journals as one application of a process approach. Finally, we will describe the use of "secret friend journals" as an alternative to dialogue journals, and report the results of a survey of our students on their

responses to the use of secret friend journals.

## Product and Process Approaches to the Teaching of Writing

In recent years, two major approaches to the teaching of first or second/foreign language writing have emerged, based on two different views of the nature of writing. These are product-based approaches and process-based approaches (Nunan, 1989).

### Product Approaches

Product approaches are defined by their emphasis on the end result of the writing process--an essay, a letter, and so on. The underlying assumption of product approaches is that the actual writing is the last step in the process of writing. A teacher who uses a product approach emphasizes producing a composition that is grammatically correct, that obeys rhetorical conventions, etc.

Product approaches reflect traditional, teacher-centered approaches to teaching in general. Teachers in a variety of situations, both L1 and L2, rely on a initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) pattern of discourse. In this typical structure, the teacher initiates the interaction by asking a question, knowing the answer already; the student responds; and the response is evaluated by the teacher (Johnson, 1989). Specifically in the traditional composition class, the teacher assigns a writing task, whether exercises or a composition, knowing what responses he/she expects; the students do the exercises or write the composition; and the teacher evaluates the results.

### Process Approaches

In contrast to product based approaches to writing, process ap-

proaches emphasize the act of writing itself, the means by which the text is created more than the text itself. Such approaches presuppose a different view of the nature of writing—a view of writing as a process that evolves through several stages as the writer discovers and molds meaning and adapts to the potential audience. These approaches stress the revising process and audience awareness.

It should be made clear that this distinction between process- and product-based approaches represents a continuum in classroom applications. Most composition courses probably fall between the extremes.

Research on the process of writing supports process approaches composition instruction (see Raimes, 1985 or Zamel, 1983 for an overview of this research). Researchers in second language classrooms of various levels (for example, Ammon, 1985; Diaz, Moll and Mehan, 1985; Hildenbrand, 1985) have studied writing programs that viewed writing as a means of communication, promoted frequent writing of longer texts, and placed emphasis on editing and on formal aspects of writing in the context of creating meaningful content—characteristics of process based approaches. Their results indicate that students made superior gains in the quality of their writing.

#### Relationship Between the Two Approaches

These two approaches to the teaching of writing are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Liebman-Kleine, 1986). They can be used in concert in the same course, with some types of assignments emphasizing audience, fluency in writing, revising, and other process variables, with other assignments putting more emphasis on control over the mechanics of the language.

## Writing as a Social Activity

A corollary to process approaches to writing is that writing, like other forms of language, is a social activity, aimed at purposeful and meaningful communication with others. Thus writing is not only a linguistic process but a social one as well. Among the social aspects of writing are opportunities to control topic, assume a variety of social roles, perform functions (advising, requesting, complaining, etc.) (Johnson, 1989), and adapt to a specific audience. Research (Edelsky, 1986; Elbow, 1981; Graves, 1983; Roen and Willey, 1988; Rubin, 1984) has indicated that awareness of the intended audience of a piece of writing influences the style and quality of that writing.

Unfortunately, the structure of the typical writing class, with the interaction limited to the teacher-student relationship and with the teacher in the role of knower and evaluator, limits rather than expands the use of written language. In their role of responder, the students have little opportunity to explore and vary social roles through their writing. One solution to the limitations of the classroom is the dialogue journal.

## Dialogue Journals

The role of dialogue in the learning of oral language is easily recognized. However, it is only relatively recently that the importance of dialogue to the development of writing ability has begun to be recognized and the potential contribution of dialogue exploited (Shuy, 1987). Dialogue writing has the advantages that it builds on what students already know, it allows the student to generate topics, and it allows the use of a variety of functions. One way that dialogue writing has been exploited is through the use of teacher-student dialogue journals.

### What is a Dialogue Journal ?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation between a teacher and student, done regularly over a period of time (Peyton, 1987). In a notebook, students write on any topic they choose, asking questions, complaining, informing, etc., and the teacher writes back, either responding to the student's topic or introducing new topics, offering comments, observations and opinions, giving advice, requesting or giving clarification, etc.

In a dialogue journal, the interaction is carried out over an extended period of time, with each partner having equal turns. In addition to being interactive and continuous, the characteristics of a dialogue journal are that each writer is free to bring up topics of mutual interest, and the partner is expected to acknowledge and often comment on the offered topic (Stanton, Shuy, Peyton, and Reed, 1988).

The focus of the dialogue journal is on communication rather than on correct form. The teacher's responses should be directed to the content of the student's journal entry, not the grammatical form. This allows students to express themselves freely.

### Background of the Use of Dialogue Journals

The use of the dialogue journal was introduced by a sixth grade teacher named Leslee Reed, whose students wrote her messages every day. She responded to those messages, and the written interaction between teacher and students was analyzed by Staton (1980). Since then, the use of dialogue journals has been expanded to uses in reading, writing, counseling, and other areas in both first and second language instruction (Shuy, 1987).

### Advantages and Disadvantages

*Advantages.* Dialogue journals have a number of advantages (Peyton, 1987). First, they allow students to participate at whatever level of English proficiency they are. Students can write about their own interests and daily activities, using the vocabulary and grammatical structures that they already control.

Second, they provide optimal conditions for acquisition of language. They focus on meaning rather than form and make use of topics of interest to the student. In reading the teacher's responses, students are exposed to language that is comprehensible and meaningful to them.

Third, dialogue journals allow the control over topic that Johnson advocated. Johnson believed that having control over the topic of the writing is motivating for students and contributes to the acquisition of language, because students are more involved in their writing and will write more if they have control over the topic.

Fourth, dialogue journals allow students to make use of different functions, something that is not normally a part of essay writing (Kreeft, 1984). Functions that may come up in dialogue journal include: complaining, encouraging, giving and asking advice, complimenting, negotiating, asking for information, consoling, and congratulating. Using functions in dialogue journals builds on and reinforces what students have learned about functions in oral language.

Fifth, dialogue journals extend teacher student contact. They permit teachers to get to know their students better than the normal classroom situation allows. Teachers can learn about their students' outside activities, their opinions about class activities and other topics, etc.

*Disadvantages.* The major disadvantage of dialogue journals is the amount of time that it requires on the part of the teacher. Even for a

relatively small class, responding to students can consume a great deal of time, in addition to evaluating other work that students might be doing.

Another disadvantage of dialogue journals between student and teacher is that there is the probability of self-censorship. While we do not know of any research on this point, it has been our observation that when writing to other students, our students initiate more personal topics than when writing to teachers. While adapting to audience is an important part of the social aspect of writing, writing to other students seems to give students a wider choice of topics.

We have also observed that in teacher-student dialogue journals, some students tend to write about quite ordinary topics, such as when they get up, what they eat and when they go to bed, or write about the same thing in entry after entry. This does not seem like it would be particularly interesting to the student or helpful in language acquisition. This may require the teacher to take control of the topic, negating one of the advantages of dialogue journals.

### Secret Friend Journals: A Variation on Dialogue Journals

The literature related to dialogue journals appears to deal virtually exclusively with teacher-student dialogue journals. However, there does not seem to be any inherent reason for this limitation. Certainly student-student dialogue journals offer possibilities for the teaching of writing. A variation of dialogue journals proposed by Green and Green (1991) is "secret friend journals." Secret friend journals are essentially student-student dialogue journals, with the additional facet that the participants' identities are kept secret from each other.

In this final section, we will discuss the secret friend journal assignment that we have used, its procedures, and its advantages and

disadvantages.

We have used a secret friend journal assignment in our required first year writing courses in Doshisha Women's Junior College in the academic years of 1991 and 1992. We also gave the students questionnaires about this experience in June, 1991, January 1992, and July, 1992. Based on our experiences, we have observed that secret friend journals share some of the advantages of teacher-student dialogue journals and have some additional advantages. Secret friend journals also resolve the disadvantages of teacher-student dialogue journals.

#### Overview

In secret friend journals, instead of writing to a teacher and receiving the teacher's feedback, students in different classes/sections are carefully paired by the teacher according to the students' ability and other factors, and the matched students write to each other regularly over a period of time. In other words, if a dialogue journal is a written conversation between teacher and student, a secret friend journal is a written conversation between two students who the teachers attempt to match according to their similar English language proficiency and common interests.

In this assignment, the students do not know their partners' identities until the end of the project. Throughout the course of the project, the paired students freely express themselves on any topic they choose, asking questions and responding to them, expressing anxiety, offering comments, giving compliments, complaining, informing, negotiating, and so on. Gradually students establish their relationship and mutual understanding.

The students' written entries are read by the teachers each time they write, but the teachers do not correct, respond to, or grade the writings.

### Procedure

*Setting up the assignment.* Before starting the project, we decided on a circulation routine, shown below. The circulation routine depends on the meeting times of the two classes and how frequently the teachers want the students to write. Two different sections of the same course or two classes are do the assignment. The following chart shows the circulation routine we used in 1992. Both sections met once a week throughout the year; the Kitao class met Thursday 13:30-15:00, and the Saeki class Friday 9:00-10:30. This procedure continues throughout the academic year.

	<i>Kitao class (Th)</i>	<i>Saeki class (Fri)</i>
<i>Orientation</i>	Secret friend journal assignment explained	
	Ss assigned to write self-entry in notebook	Ss assigned to write self-entry on separate paper
<i>Class 1</i>	Ss turn in self-entries	Ss turn in self-entries
	Teachers read self-entries from students' separate paper put in partner's notebook	
<i>Class 2</i>	Ss receive journals	
<i>Class 3</i>	Ss turn in journals	
		Teachers read
		Ss receive journals
		Ss return journals by Thursday morning in mailbox
<i>Class 4</i>		Teachers read
	Ss receive journals	

class 5

Ss return journals

Teachers read

Ss receive journals

*Explaining the assignment.* During the orientation, the concept and task of the secret friend journal assignment is explained to the students in both classes, and they are all assigned to write a one-page self-introduction. One class writes the self-introduction in a notebook, and the other class writes on a separate piece of paper. The self introduction may include their hometowns, hobbies, interests, future plans or dreams, family backgrounds, and anything else that they would like to disclose about themselves. However, the self-introduction should not include their real names, and the names should not appear anywhere in the journals. (So that the teachers know who the self-introductions are from, students' names are attached to the papers or notebooks on small pieces of paper. These papers are removed before the notebooks are given to the first class.) Other regulations such as the approximate length of entry students must write each time (we used two pages in a B5-sized notebook) and the assignment deadlines should also be clearly explained.

Teachers may suggest topics and guidelines for the self introductions and journal entries. For example, the self introduction should be personal but not too personal (students are introducing themselves to a stranger); students should tell enough about themselves to be interesting, but not so much that their identity could easily be guessed (Green and Green, 1991).

During the first year that we did this assignment, students just made journal entries. A student would read her partner's journal entry and write one of her own. Sometimes students made their own entries with-

out really responding to the partner's entry. The second year that we used this assignment, we had the students write their journal in the form of a letter, beginning the entry with the date and a salutation and ending a closing and signature. We felt that this format encouraged students to respond to their partners more.

For their self introduction, students were instructed to date the entry and use the salutation, "Dear Friend." They were instructed to begin the letter by specifying what nickname they wanted their partner to use to address them and explain why.

During the first year, students used A4 sized notebooks and were assigned to write one page every two weeks. During the second year, they used B5 sized notebooks and wrote two pages every two weeks.

It was strongly emphasized that students needed to turn in the notebook every time it was assigned and turn it in on time. This project can only be successful if most or all of the students are conscientious in carrying out the assignment.

*Pairing off Students.* After receiving the self-introductions, the teachers pair up the students according to their writing proficiency, interests, and home regions. As much as possible, students with similar proficiency and interests and from different home regions are paired. Other factors such as writing style and the amount the students write are also taken into account.

When the class size of the two sections are not equal, some students must write to more than one partner at once. The teachers ask students with higher writing proficiency to write to more than one partner, offering extra credit, if possible.

Each pair is assigned a number, which is written on the front cover of the notebook instead of the students' real names. A list should be

made of the numbers and names of the students for the teachers' use. The numbers and list are useful when the teacher is reading the journals and to check quickly to see which students have not turned in journals.

*The Teachers' Role.* It should be emphasized to students that the teachers will read the journal entries but not comment on them or make any corrections. If any grading is done, it should be based on whether students complete the assignment and complete it on time, not on content or grammar. If students are digressing from the nature of the assignment or not following the basic regulations of the assignment, it may be necessary to give advice orally to them.

*The End of the Assignment.* At the end of the academic year, we arranged a joint party for the two classes involved so that students should meet their secret friends face-to-face.

The party could be arranged at the middle of the course, but the results of our questionnaire indicated that students wanted to continue with the same secret friend throughout the academic year and meet the secret friend at the end of the year.

#### Questionnaire on the Use of Secret Friend Journals

We have been using secret friend journals into our first year college writing courses in the academic year 1991 and the first half of 1992. At the end of each semester, we gave students a questionnaire and asked their opinions about the journal assignment. (The purpose of the questionnaire was to help us manage the assignment, not to make a statistical analysis of students' responses.) We asked about the usefulness of the assignment, problems students found, how they felt about the frequency of the assignment (writing every two weeks), how they felt about their partners, and so on.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, we found that students felt that secret friend journals were useful in helping them improve their writing. Though most students did not specify their reasons, a few students mentioned that the journals allow them to write about their daily lives, to express themselves freely, and to increase their English vocabulary. Most students felt that writing one A4 page or two B5 pages every other week was the right amount of work. Very few students had any complaints about the assignment, and most wanted to continue the assignment through the second semester and meet their partners at the end of the academic year in January.

#### Advantages of Secret Friend Journals

Secret friend journals have most of the advantages that teacher-student dialogue journals retain, and have some additional advantages as well.

*Advantages Shared with Teacher-Student Dialogue Journals.* First, since students are carefully paired in terms of their English writing proficiency, the level of reading and writing expected of them is within their ability. In addition, students are exposed to new expressions that their partners use within a context that they are likely to understand. They have an opportunity to become aware of the expressions and eventually, to be able to manipulate them and widen their store of expressions. Some of the students mentioned in the survey the usefulness of secret friend journals in terms of the way to increase their English vocabulary and expressions. Therefore, students both make use of what they already know and are exposed to new expressions and vocabulary, which they can also incorporate in their own writing.

Second, because students are paired according to their interests, they

can use writing in English purely as a means to express their thoughts to their partners on topics on which they are interested, a situation which the students find motivating. Topics are totally controlled by the students. Information is exchanged and meaning is clarified. The writings are focused on meaning rather than form. We observed that students often treated their secret friend as a close confidant, sharing very personal information and asking advice on personal problems.

Students' writings frequently express their enjoyment of the opportunity to communicate with their partner. The following excerpts from students' journals demonstrate this:

— Hello. Thank you for your interesting story about your life in USA. You had a lot of good experiences this summer, didn't you? I came to want to visit to America by reading your journal. . . .

— Hello! I'm happy because you wrote me in spite of leaving the diary notebook. I like writing this. . . .

-- Hi, this is the second time to write to you. Now first, I'll answer your questions. . . .

— I'm sorry that I can't write well in English, but I want to continue with you more and more.

· I need your opinion about my problem. I'm looking forward to reading your reply. Thank you for your help. . . .

Third, although secret friend journals do not directly extend teacher-student contact through writing and responding, teachers can learn more about their students activities, opinions, problems, etc., while reading their entries. In fact, it appears that students choose a wider variety of topics in secret friend journals than in teacher student dialogue journals.

Fourth, in writing secret friend journals, students use a lot of different functions in order to convey what they want to tell to their partners.

Ordinary essay writing assignments do not usually give students the opportunity to practice these various functions.

*Additional Advantages.* We have found that the following are advantages specifically linked to secret friend journals. First, once the students are paired, this assignment requires relatively little of the teacher's time. It would be difficult or impossible for a teacher to provide the amount of response to all of the students in a class that the students' partners do continually through the academic year. Teachers can spend the time instead responding to other types of assignments.

Second, the fact that the partner's identity is not known seems to add spice and mystery to this type of dialogue journal assignment. As mentioned earlier, our survey results indicated that most of the students preferred not to learn their partners' identities until the end of the course.

Third, we have observed that students do not tend to write about ordinary activities such as their daily routine, as some tend to in teacher-student dialogue journals. They seem to be more inclined to try to write about topics that their secret friend will be interested in.

### Conclusion

Research has indicated that making use of the process nature of writing, including its social aspects, improves the teaching of writing. Dialogue journals, either between teacher and students or between paired students, are one classroom application of the process approach. Secret friend journals are one technique that makes use of some of the characteristic of a process based approach.

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