

READING AND WRITING: AN INTEGRATION OF SKILLS

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Resumen

La importancia de ver las destrezas básicas de escritura, lectura, escucha y habla como habilidades que no deben ser enfocadas por los docentes en forma aislada en la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, debe ser una constante en el planeamiento de cualquier lección de Inglés como segunda lengua (L2). La presente investigación de campo intenta mostrarle a la comunidad de colegas dedicados a la enseñanza del Inglés como L2, la manera en que la lectura puede beneficiar el desarrollo de la escritura. El ejercicio fue puesto en práctica en un grupo de estudiantes de la carrera de la Enseñanza del Inglés, en la Sede del Atlántico de la Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR). Esto se realizó siguiendo procedimientos pedagógicos establecidos para la integración de dichas destrezas.

Abstract

The importance of approaching the basic linguistic skills reading, writing, listening and speaking, as a group of abilities that must be taught in an integrated way should always be reflected in any lesson plan for an EFL teaching class. The following field investigation attempts to show the English teaching community how reading may positively contribute with the development of writing. The exercise was carried out in a group of freshmen from the English major at the UCR, Atlantic Branch.

Introduction

The following investigation tries to find an answer to the question of whether reading contributes substantially in the quality improvement of written communication or not. The pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities used in the classroom as part of this investigation were inspired on existing activities of the same nature in ESL/EFL teaching.

As an EFL teacher at the University of Costa Rica, my feeling is that a study like this could be relevant to my professional activity as well as to that of other teachers because first of all by observing reading and writing as skills that must be integrated, we as teachers will be able to develop more effective lesson plans in order to propel the development of those skills. Second of all, a study like this could help us, EFL/ESL teachers, to modify our existing schemes regarding the teaching of writing, and by existing schemes we mean here all of those traditional points of view that used to consider writing as a product (the product approach) and not as a process (the process approach).

By seeing writing as a process, we can incorporate reading more effectively as a preparation for writing and also, writing itself may turn to be a less painful or ego-destructive process. This new approach to the teaching of and reading will help us to polish the level of English of our students, and, consequently, to make out of the L2 learning process a much more satisfactory experience for both the teacher and the learners.

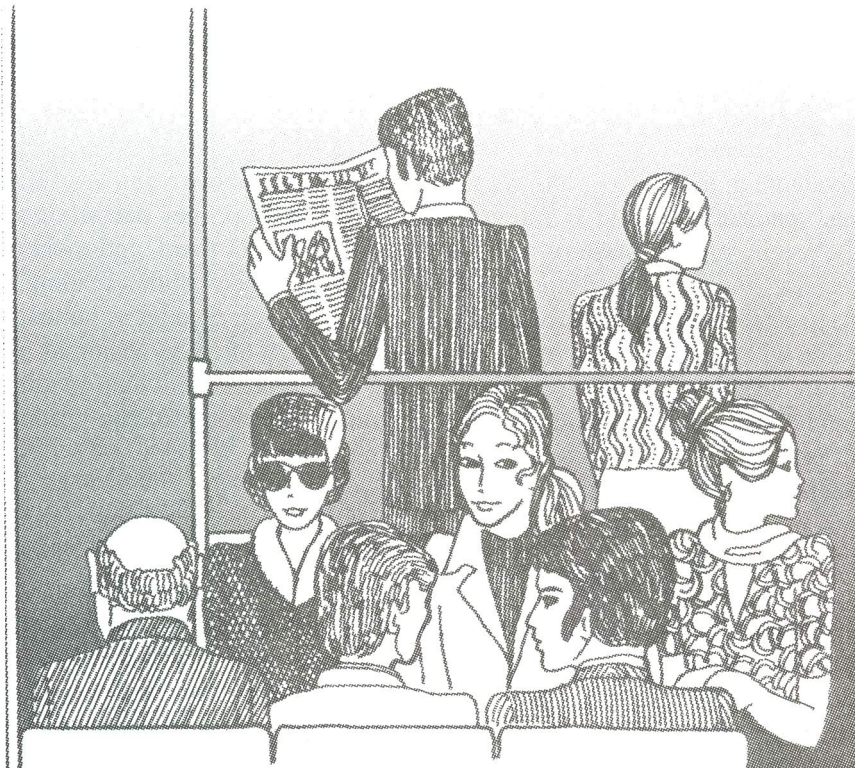
Review of the literature

Reading and writing are not less important than speaking and listening when it comes to learn a language formally. With the introduction of the process approach to writing, the skills of reading and writing are no longer seen as independent from each other by many teachers. In Kroll's (1991) "own words, the traditional paradigm for L1 writing classes was rooted in having students read and discuss texts which they would then go on to write about."

And, though it is true that writing implies the action of encoding ideas, and reading implies the one of decoding them, it has been discovered that reading is actually a good starting point for writing. As Kroll points it out, "The dominant philosophy seemed to be that one learns to write by writing, and that perhaps reading had very little to do with the acquisition of writing" (Kroll, 1991, p. 253). Now, Kroll (1991) also mentions that, "ESL teachers following the developments in L1 writing classrooms also went through a period in which reading played almost no role in the writing classroom." Thus, at this point we, as EFL teachers might be asking ourselves about the reasons for reading to be considered nowadays "as a good pre-writing stage. One possible answer to this question could be that." On one level,

gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose." That is, reading, in a way, provides the future writer with certain notions of how to shape a reader-based prose." That is, reading, in a way, provides the future writer with certain notions of how to shape a reader-based prose. On the other hand, Spack (1985, p. 706) cited in Kroll (1991, p. 254) expands the issue of reading and writing by saying that, "An active exploration of the writer/reader interaction can lead students to realize and internalize the idea that what they write becomes another person's reading and must therefore anticipate a reader's needs and meet a reader's expectations." In other words, writers must take into account that they are not writing to themselves. On the contrary, they must think about the fact that there will

be someone else reading what they wrote, and that therefore, some kind of text-reader interaction is ultimately going to happen. This puts the writer in the position of predicting as much as possible what the reader would like to obtain out of the text. This can also help the writer to look for the specific helpful reading materials that will prepare himself / herself for the development of a particular written piece. But reading is not the one and only way for a writer to prepare him / herself for the writing process. In fact, "Writing is also a means of reinforcing another language's skills. Writers gather information by reading, observing, talking with others, synthesizing and evaluating data" (Hughey, 1983, p. 83). As we have seen so far, "Writing requires extensive previous learning" (Hughey, 1983, p. 5), and since reading is an important starting point for this previous learning to be developed, we must then devote



reading serve some very practical purposes in the writing class, particularly for ESL writers who have less fluency in the language. At the very least, "readings provide models of what English texts look like, and even if not used for the purpose of imitation where students are asked to produce an English text to match the style of the model text, readings provide input which helps students develop awareness of English prose style" (Kroll, 1991, p. 254). Also according to Krashen (1984, p. 20) cited in Kroll (1991, p. 254), "It is reading that

some time evaluating the strategies that will foster the reading skill in our L2 learners so that they could become better writers.

Reading must also undergo a process to be more effective. This process goes beyond the simple act of sitting down and begin reading. First of all, we as ESL/EFL teachers must try to adapt the reading materials to the level of proficiency of our learners. This is very important because, "Students need to have access to texts

that are within their language proficiency range-texts that they can understand to a great degree without extensive use of a dictionary. In order to summarize the texts, they need to have a reasonable degree of comprehension" (Abersold and Field, 1997, p. 46). It is also important to prepare our students to begin reading. This preparation works as the warming up a swimmer needs to have before actually plunging into the water in order to enhance his/her performance. As Abersold and field (1997, p. 66) claim, "an introduction helps students to recall any information that they may already know about the topic (content schema), either from personal experience or other reading. If the students keep this knowledge in mind as they read, they increase their opportunities to make sense of the information they find in the text." But an activation stage is going not only to help our students to bring back all that existing knowledge about the topic, but also to motivate them to read the text. With regards to this issue of motivation, Abersold and Field (1997, p. 68) say that, "getting the students to start to think about the topic should increase their interest in the topic and thereby motivate them to read the text." Besides activating the students' schemata, one as a teacher can ask them to preview the text before beginning to read. According to Abersold and Field (1997, p. 73), "Previewing enables students to establish their own expectations about what information will find in the text and the way that information will be organized." Furthermore, Abersold and Field (1997, p. 73) also mention the following elements as, "particularly useful when previewing long texts: the title, the author, source, subtitles, subheadings, photographs, drawings, graphs, charts, tables, spacing (e.g. extra space between paragraphs), print that is different in size, darkness and style." Also the skills of skimming and scanning are mentioned by Abersold and field (1997, pp. 74-75) as useful when it comes to previewing the text. They define skimming as, "a quick, superficial reading of a text in order to get the general gist of it." On the other hand, scanning is defined as, "looking quickly through the text for a specific piece of information at the sentence level." In other words, activities like to look for anaphoric references or to look for the meaning of key words in context are therefore good examples of bottom-up activities. Also, getting the main idea of each paragraph constitutes another useful activity before reading the whole article.

Once the student has already finished the article, we must include a set of post-reading activities, most of which are going to be reading comprehension

questions. We can also ask the students to organize a group of scrambled main ideas in chronological order according to the order in which they appeared in the reading. There are many ways to make our students benefit themselves from the reading after they have read it.

But reading is not the only strategy that we can use before asking our students to write. Actually, there are many other activities that our students can do to enrich their pre-writing stage. For example, there is a big category in which we can classify all the different pre-writing activities which is the concept of "Heuristics." According to Hughey (1983, p. 62), heuristics are, "techniques which, then and now, set the mind in motion, entreat thinking, stir memory, and coax imagination."

Hughey (1983, p. 65) suggests in the following chart some of the most useful heuristics for enhancing the pre-reading stage (see illustration in next page).

As we have seen, reading and writing are skills that if integrated properly will propel our students mastery of the L2 we are teaching them, and most of all, we as L2 instructors must remember that reading is specially great as a pre-writing stage, so let's challenge ourselves in the implementation of a new vision as we begin teaching writing as a process in which reading will be actively integrated. The years of the product approach are already in the past.

Methodology

- a) **Subjects:**
The students who participated in the different reading and writing activities used to develop this research project are twenty-three English majors at the University of Costa Rica's eastern branch in Turrialba. All of them are freshmen in the major; therefore, their levels of English are in most cases extremely basic, almost real beginners. Most of the students are between nineteen and twenty years old.
- b) **Instruments:**
For the development of the writing section, a set of pictures issued by Scott Foresman and Company were used to activate the students' imagination so that they could create a story in past tense.

	Method	Used For	Characteristics
	Brain pattern	Finding a subject and relating propositions	Unstructured; free form; quick; group or individual
1. Solar 2. Nuclear 3. Thermal 4. etc	Pyramid pattern	Limiting and developing a subject (adaptation of brain pattern)	Unstructured; linear; quick; group or individual
	Listing	Finding and limiting a subject	Semistructured; group or individual
	Journal	Finding a subject and one's reactions to it	Unstructured; individual
	Brainstorming	Generating ideas, information, and new perspectives	Unstructured; group
	Loop writing	Finding a focus for the subject	Semistructured; time-consuming; individual
	Working outlines	Finding a focus, relating and ordering ideas	Structured; group or individual

With regards to the reading comprehension section, a sequence of handouts were created by the instructor, so that the students could have a pre-reading stage, a while-reading stage, and a post-reading stage. All of these exercises were developed to be applied in the reading comprehension of three different readings which

were taken from the book *Basic Reading Power* by Beatrice S. Mikulecky and Linda Jeffries.

- c) Procedures:
First of all, the students were asked to write a story based on a sequence of pictures (the Scott Foresman's pictures) with no previous activation

stage whatsoever. This was simply a way to obtain a sample of the outcome of writing as product that was supposed to be contrasted later to an outcome of writing as a process produced by the same students. Next, the students went through a three-day-reading comprehension training. Each day, the instructor provided the students with a set of four different handouts. Those handouts contained a pre-reading, a while-reading, and a post-reading exercise about a specific short reading. The pre-reading exercise consisted of a semantic mapping where students were supposed to write different predictions about the reading that they were just about to read. Later, individually, students had to skim the reading for the first time in order to corroborate their predictions. They were supposed to accomplish this first skimming within a time limit of two minutes. When the time limit was up, the instructor would ask the students to turn the reading over, so that they could not see it while doing the corroboration. Once this first part was finished, the instructor would give the students a second handout which corresponded to the first while-reading activity. In this activity, students were supposed to scan the reading individually in order to find some anaphoric references. The students worked within a time limit of two minutes and fifteen seconds. After the accomplishment of this second exercise, the instructor would proceed to pass around a new handout. This time it would be an exercise to choose the option that represented the best summary of the story's plot. The students would skim the reading within a time limit of two minutes. After that, they would turn the reading over and proceed to choose the best option from the handout. Finally, the teacher would pass around the last handout which included a set of questions that would work as a post-reading activity. This time, the students were asked to work in pairs for about ten minutes. This procedure was repeated with all of the three readings. After working with the third reading, the instructor would ask the students to write another story based on a new sequence of pictures. The purpose of doing this was to check if the skill of writing was improved after having the previous reading exercises as a pre-writing stage.

d) Results:
After accomplishing this whole process of writing—reading—writing, it was determined that there was a bit of an improvement in the composition written by the student who was monitored for the purpose of this research. With regards to the first composition that had no pre-writing stage, let us mention the following as the most relevant weaknesses found in it:

- 1) lots of comma splices,
- 2) some minor past tense problems,
- 3) lack of subordination to avoid choppiness,
- 4) minor spelling errors.

Even though the second composition shows almost the same weaknesses as the first one, there are some minor improving aspects such as some instances of subordination and a better use of connectors.

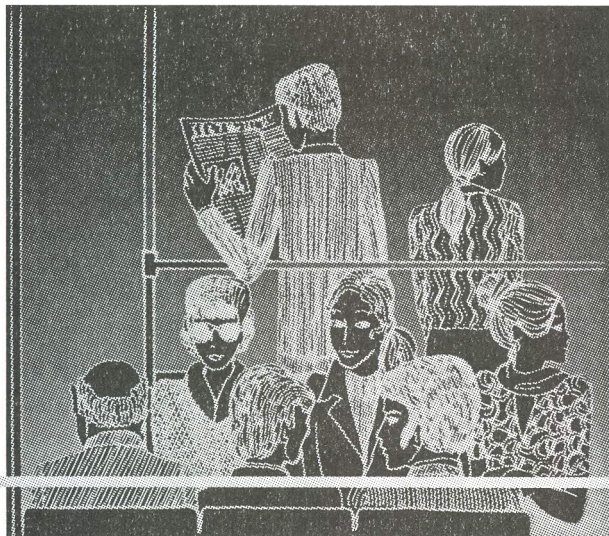
In general, it was perceived that the experience of giving the students a more guided and methodical process of reading proved successful regarding the accomplishment of a better comprehension. Also it was very enjoyable to hear students saying that they did not understand why, but they felt that writing was somehow easier after having read some stories similar to the one that they were asked to write.

Conclusion

As the most important limitation of this study we must mention the fact that the group of students who were chosen as the subjects for this observation were freshmen at the UCR's English major; therefore, their level of English was extremely basic, even inexistent in some cases. This low level of English made the writing experience a more difficult exercise to carry out in this particular class.

In spite of this limitation, the outcome of this project showed that some improvement can be obtained in writing if we develop it as a process and not as a product. In other words, the outcome of writing seems to be better when the process is preceded by a reading stage. At the same time, the reading part proved to be more effective when it was accompanied by some strategic pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities.

As a suggestion for further research, we may say that it would be recomendable to try this very same experiment, but this time for a longer period of time , maybe a whole semester, in order to see if the improvement in writing turned to be much more representative.



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