



HOW TO DEVELOP WRITING SKILLS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

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Abstract:

Writing is potentially the most difficult skill for Foreign Language (FL) learners to master (Nunan 1999). It motivates thinking, that is, it can help learners to organise their ideas, and develop their critical thinking skills to summarise, analyse, and criticize (Rao, 2007). In this paper, the authors analyze the role of reading in the process of developing writing skills. The literature review shows that there is a close interconnection between the two skills. The relationship has long been a subject of considerable debate, and the mutually beneficial influence of the two skills has been confirmed. It is essential to understand the interrelation between reading and writing in order to develop these skills effectively. The authors analyse how a reading passage can be exploited to boost writing skills. In particular, how a reading passage can be used as a model, as a source of ideas, and as a sample of language use, which eventually advances writing skills. The authors studied several coursebooks to analyse how reading is used in the process of teaching writing. Observations and recommendations are shared at the end of the article. Namely, the authors confirm the idea of integration is widely exploited by the textbook writers. Moreover, every reading passage is looked at from different perspectives and is used for several purposes.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, developing writing skills development, reading passages, integration

1. Introduction

It is a widely-held belief among FL teachers that reading and writing are two sides of the same process. *"Together, reading and writing make a conversation between the reader and the writer."* (McDonald, Salomone, Gutierrez, Japtok, 2015, p. 1). The connection between the two skills has even been called *"boringly obvious"* (Booth, 1963, p. 113).

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Consequently, this close relation between the two skills is significant in developing both. Due to this, teaching reading and writing skills is viewed as integration of both in the teaching and learning process. Cunningsworth (1995) indicate that when reading texts are used as models for writing, teachers usually ask learners to write something based on the models while giving information in a different form. Nevertheless, learners are not provided with sufficient input of language and exposure to different types of texts (Tin, 2003). He maintains that the use of reading texts as input to generate ideas in the process of writing is necessary. McDonough and Shaw (2003) also indicate that composition requires learners to 'create' an essay on a given topic and some textbooks provide a reading text as a stimulus for essay writing on a parallel topic.

We have encountered quite an impressive number of research papers that deal with reading-writing correlations and the description of experiments that prove that the two skills are mutually reinforced if taught in collaboration. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the techniques that can help achieve the maximum benefit from this collaboration. We also reviewed several textbooks to see to what extent the principle of an integrative approach to teaching reading and writing is implemented. The conclusions that we drew are summarized in part 5.

2. Literature review

For more than 50 years, researchers have been discussing whether reading and writing are similar and whether they contribute to each other or should be taught separately. The belief that reading and writing are contrasted as the first one is a receptive skill while the second one is productive was gradually supplanted by the idea that the two processes have much in common and thus can be interrelated and interwoven in the classroom. Eventually, most scientists (Barrs, 2000; Shanahan, 2008; & Shen, 2009) agreed that reading and writing are interdependent. Moreover, reading may be regarded as a *"necessary precondition for any writing task"* (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1985, p. 85).

Large-scale research undertaken by Krashen (1982) stated that writing ability is not learnt but is acquired via extensive reading. In his opinion, the key factor is exposure to large amounts of L2 input material. Studies by Davies (1983) and Schleppegrell (1984) yielded comparable results showing a strong correlation between extensive input and improving output. Research by Tsang (1996) confirmed that students exposed to reading *"exhibited significant gains in content and language use, and in overall improvement of the quality of writing"* (p. 226). In particular, Tsang (1996) proved by his research that reading can lead to improvement of vocabulary, text organization, and spelling. However, his findings maintain that *"punctuation and paragraphing may require instruction for improvement to take place"* (p. 228).

The history of the development of FL teaching methods shows that after being used only as a tool, writing was later given a more significant role. Consequently, the nature of writing as a process was recognized and introduced into the classrooms. *"The*

current modification of the process-oriented approach to teaching writing skills has emphasis on reciprocal integration of reading and writing” (Tuan, 2012, p. 489).

2.1. Reading passage as a model

The main reason why reading is *“an essential pre-condition to produce good writers”* (Tuan, 2012, p. 490) is due to the fact that passages written by others can be used as **models** for one’s own writing. Textbook writers often begin a writing lesson by providing learners with a sample. As Murcia and Olshtain (2000) note, *“Many writing classes begin with reading texts, analyzing them, looking at them as models for writing or using them as a piece of communication to respond to”* (p. 158). Such a deductive approach is feasible for introducing certain formats, such as memos, CVs, formal emails, and cause and effect essays. Smith (1983) named this approach as *“reading like a writer”* because the writer analyzes the text from the point of view of the final product he has to produce. Tuan (2012) in his research supported this *“read-like-a-writer”* approach, which means learners look at the text from the point of view of a writer to identify the flow of ideas, the mechanics, style, and organization. Some researchers note that for a language learner it is not enough to communicate meaning. What is also required is *“knowledge about how different kinds of texts are conventionally structured and presented to the community. For example, narration differs from exposition, report, or argumentation. Thus, a model should be presented to student to familiarize them with the differences.”* (Escribano, 1999). As Smith (1988) notes, *“To learn to write for newspapers, you must read newspapers; textbooks about them will not suffice. For magazines, browse through magazines rather than through correspondence courses on magazine writing. To write poetry, read it”* (p. 26).

Some authors (Choo, 2010; & Vasudevan, 2006) claim that today’s younger generation is more used to creating multimodal texts which do not have a rigid structure, but which are rich with video, pictures and captions. However, even in this case it is important to provide learners with samples which will allow them to analyze the interconnections between verbal and visual representations of ideas.

In research by Rubin and Hansen (1984), this is classified as *“structural knowledge”* which is required for both readers and writers. In other words, while learners are reading a text, they pay attention to its structure, which makes comprehension easier. This knowledge of the structure can subsequently be applied when the students come to writing. Kennedy and Bolitho (1985) also claim that reading is *“a necessary precondition for any writing task, since the writer must be aware of the structure of a particular type of writing before he can produce it”* (p. 85). That is why activities should be offered by the teacher to draw learners’ attention to the structure of the text.

Here is a list of tasks the teacher may prepare for the students to analyze the sample text:

- identify the structural parts of the reading passage;
- read the text and identify its type (exposition, narration, etc.);
- outline the passage that you have read;
- come up with ideas for the subheadings for each part of the model text;
- rearrange the given parts of the text in the correct order/layout;

- compare two texts and identify which part is missing;
- complete the missing parts of the text.

2.2. Reading passage as a source of ideas

Reading broadens a person's outlook and provides a great deal of **knowledge**. In this case the language the learners are reading in is not important. Someone who knows about green technologies from reading about it in the first language will have more ideas if asked to write about this issue in another language. Reading about the topic in a FL will also help to master the language of a specific area more rapidly.

Rubin and Hansen (1984) define this connection as "information knowledge" – one of the categories that is required in reading as well as in writing. Quite often learners are unable to produce a written work because of the lack of ideas. The research conducted by Zainal, Husin, and Pendidikan (2010) confirmed that *"the majority of the respondents have difficulty in getting started on the writing because of lack of ideas"* (p.5). Therefore, by means of reading we equip learners with necessary information and broaden their outlook. It expands and deepens their subject knowledge. Information gained in reading is one possible source of content for their prospective writing. Research by Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014) clearly indicate that extensive reading program may have a significant positive effect on learners' writing performance.

Below we provide some ideas of what a teacher can ask learners to do in order to be able to use the reading passage as a source of ideas:

- list the most interesting/ surprising facts that you learnt from the reading passage;
- compare what you knew about the topic before reading and after reading the passage;
- answer questions about the details of the passage;
- list the most important facts / ideas stated in the text that could help you explain the issues discussed in the text to your friend/colleague.

2.3. Reading passage as a source of language

Krashen (1989) provides evidence that vocabulary and spelling are acquired by reading. Reading original literature gives students the opportunity to see samples of **genuine language patterns**. This idea was supported by Mahmud (1989), who found that literature helped students acquire *"native-like competence in English"* (p. 25).

There is a discussion whether teachers should expose learners to adapted texts which focus on specific language items or let them read authentic texts such as novel excerpts or magazine articles. Variety and adaptability are the key factors of success, that is, learners should be exposed to various reading sources to be able to see samples of real language use. However, this does not mean that the students should only be exposed to classical literature by British authors. Graded readers that gained their reputation in the FL context can still be used. It is noted that the adjusted language level as well as the deliberate repetition of vocabulary under study helps the learners to master certain language items quickly. Eckhoff (1983) found that the linguistic

complexity of the sentence structure in the reading text could be found in the children's writing. Therefore, learners acquire vocabulary, grammar structures, phrasal verbs, and other linguistic patterns that they can later use in their own written text.

To draw learners' attention to particular linguistic phenomena in the reading passage, the following activities can be provided:

- find synonyms from the text;
- underline words/phrases that the author uses to talk about causes / effects / differences;
- write out the words/phrases that describe the process;
- analyse the function of highlighted words;
- choose the correct words or phrases from the text that you have read to complete the following paragraph.

2.4. Reading and thinking skills development

There are grounds to claim that "*reading-to-write tasks*" (Delaney, 2008, p. 141) can contribute to **thinking skills development**. It has become a trend in current FL teaching methodology to design classroom activities focusing on various levels of thinking skills that they might require. Reading-writing paradigm can be effectively used for developing higher level thinking skills. Asking learners to read the text and summarize and/or comment on it will involve higher level thinking skills, such as analyzing and evaluating. Providing the reader's response to the passage not only supports and boosts further comprehension by allowing the students to reflect on the meaning, but also aids the development of writing skills as the learners gain the skills of summarizing and paraphrasing. In this case, the learners do not only read the text to reproduce the content or the format, but they also are encouraged to analyze the passage, evaluate and explain why they consider the selection effective, persuasive or convincing.

The following types of activities might encourage learners to apply their thinking skills while reading a passage:

- summarize the given text;
- outline the text that you have read;
- rank the recommendations provided by the author from "less useful" to "more useful";
- draw a flow chart / diagram based on the content of the text that you have read;
- evaluate the relevance of the arguments / examples provided by the author of the passage;
- state if you agree or disagree with the author of the passage and justify your opinion;
- evaluate if the given passage can be used as a good sample of the given type of text and justify your answer.

3. Methodology

We reviewed several textbooks to see if the listed ways of integrative approach to teaching writing and reading are implemented.

The list of selected textbooks is presented in Table 1 in alphabetical order. The choice of books was based on several criteria:

1. EFL textbooks only, i.e. books that are used in language classrooms, not handbooks or self-study books.
2. We did not limit ourselves by books purely focused on teaching writing as a skill. We also reviewed the comprehensive coursebooks that develop four basic skills; however, we mainly focused on the units or sections of the book that deal with teaching writing. In particular, we selected units or sections of the course book that are targeted at a specific tangible product (e.g. writing a well-structured paragraph, structuring an article, etc.)
3. The teaching context that both authors of the article work at the moment was also considered as a criterion for selection; therefore, the preference was given to the books that are suitable for university students or graduates who are preparing to study or have already started their way in academic environment and need to improve their writing skills.
4. Textbooks by different publishers are represented among the books that were selected for analysis to eliminate any bias of promoting a certain publishing house.

Table 1: Sources used for analysis

| # | Title | Publisher | Year of publication |
|---|--|-----------|---------------------|
| 1 | Academic Writing from Paragraph to Essay | Macmillan | 2003 |
| 2 | English for Academics | CUP | 2015 |
| 3 | Oxford EAP | OUP | 2016 |
| 4 | Writing Academic English | Pearson | 2006 |

Full details about the books are provided in the reference list at the end of the article. For the convenience of the readers in the analytical part below we will be referring to the number of the sources provided in Table 1.

4. Findings and Discussions

The aforementioned selected sources were analyzed so as to identify how reading is integrated into the development of writing skills. Therefore, we collected quantitative and qualitative data about the number of reading passages and the purpose of including these passages in the teaching materials.

Table 2: The uses of texts in the analyzed sources

| Source number | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | |
|---|--------|---------|------------------|------------------|---------|---------|-----------|------------|
| | Unit 4 | Unit 10 | Module 2, unit 3 | Module 3, unit 2 | Unit 10 | Unit 12 | Chapter 9 | Chapter 12 |
| The section that was analyzed | | | | | | | | |
| Number of texts used in the unit of the book | 4 | 12 | 11 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| Texts used as a model | 2 | 8 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| Texts used as a source of ideas | 1 | - | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| Texts used as a source of language | - | 1 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Texts used as a means of developing thinking skills | 4 | 11 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 |

The findings from the presented statistics are as follows:

In all textbooks, the writers have attempted to use the reading passages to their maximum. Each text is used for more than one purpose. For example, the textbook writers provide learners with a passage **as a model** for them to see the structural peculiarities of a certain piece of writing. Subsequently, the learners are asked to perform some analytical tasks (e.g. present the main ideas of the text in a diagram; evaluate writer's point of view; provide their own opinion). We classified these activities as ones which develop **critical thinking skills**. Finally, the same reading passage can be used for **analyzing the language** (e.g. write out linking words; fill in the gaps with suitable words; explain the grammatical function of the highlighted words). This is a very effective way of using a reading passage in the language classroom.

All the textbook writers provided learners with **sample texts**. This confirms the belief that effective writing starts with reading since learners need to become familiarized with the structural peculiarities of the text, its parts and components. In some cases, more than one sample is provided for learners. The ratio of texts used as samples varies from 100% (source 4) to 25% (source 3).

The number of model texts varies from 1 to 8. This depends on the type of the text and space/layout constraints of a textbook. When the aim of the textbook unit is to teach students how to write an argumentative essay, the publishers cannot afford to provide more than 1 or 2 samples. However, if the text is not so lengthy (e.g. summary, introduction, one section of an article), then the materials writers use their opportunity to expose learners to a bigger number of model texts.

In most cases if the textbook writers provide a text **as a model** for learners to get a better idea about the structural peculiarities of a written text (e.g. article or paragraph), the activities that involve critical **thinking skills** are provided (e.g. state the main idea of the text; choose which title is not appropriate and justify your choice).

Unfortunately, in some cases (sources 1 and 4) the **language** is practised in isolated activities that are not based on the texts provided, which we argue is a missed opportunity since the model text always provides samples of linguistic units that the

teacher wants to draw attention to. Analyzing the language of the sample passage gives learners an opportunity to see the language used in context, which simplifies the process of expressing their own ideas later.

The extent to which the reading passages were used **as a source of ideas** cannot be confirmed since we do not have access to information about the specific group of learners taking these courses. We believe that the text can be used for broadening learners' outlook if it provides some information, statistics, and facts about the topic under study. In the units that we analyzed, this information was not used directly in the same unit. However, this does not mean that the learners cannot use it for writing on the same topic later. For example, source 3 provides a lengthy model text at the beginning of the unit. It writes about the demographic changes that happened during the 20th century (cause and effect essay). By the end of the unit, the students are asked to write a cause and effect essay on other suggested topics. However, we believe, the data that students learnt from the text that they read at the beginning might be successfully used for the tasks that they perform later in the course.

We could find only a few examples of reading passages in which the **ideas** can be used by the learners directly in the same unit. We believe this can be referred to as a variation of "*loop input*" (Woodward, 2003). "*The content is mirrored in the process*" (Mann & Walsh, 2017). In source 2, learners read a text that explains the topic that they have to write about later. They are offered texts about different forms of assessment, so that they are familiar with the concepts and are able to use them in their writing. We believe, this approach is very difficult to apply because it cannot be implemented with every topic, which explains the small number of examples in the sources that we analyzed.

5. Conclusion

Teaching writing by means of reading has become an effective and widely used tool in FL teaching methodology. In this paper, we advocate the belief that writing does not come from direct instruction (Krashen, 1993) because many aspects of writing are acquired through reading. Writing skills benefit immensely if learners are encouraged to read. Teaching writing in relation to reading aids learners' writing development. For instance, reading passage can be used as a model that will help learners to produce a text of a similar format. Reading can also be offered to students to provide them with ideas for writing. Moreover, learners can absorb a great number of authentic samples of language use, which can considerably enhance the level of their own writing. Reading is also an effective method to broaden undergraduates' outlook, which will eventually boost their writing skills. Finally, analyzing a reading passage can serve as an efficient tool for developing learners' thinking skills that are essential for structuring written work, providing arguments and justifications. These ideas have been illustrated with examples of activities that can be used in the classroom.

Having analysed several textbooks, we came to the conclusion that materials writers extensively apply the integrated approach to teaching reading and writing. Reading passages are provided as samples, sources of ideas, pool of language resources

as well as a tool for expanding critical thinking skills. However, we have noticed that texts are not fully exploited for linguistic analysis. In some cases, the textbook writers provide out-of-context language activities, which we consider as a missed opportunity.

We believe that the results of the presented analysis have emphasized the importance of the parallel development of both skills (reading and writing), have confirmed the effectiveness of such integrated approach, and have encouraged the educators to apply it in practical classrooms.

6. About the Authors

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