

RESEARCH INTO READING -WRITING CONNECTIONS IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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INTRODUCTION

A problem of getting through a vast amount of reading materials is relevant to a great majority of students. The issue of learning how to read efficiently is also of a paramount importance in the second language basically because many learners usually prefer to translate word by word.

It is thought that learners' ability to write in the L2 depends on efficiency in reading. Researchers have only recently begun to explore reading-writing relationship. Research into reading-writing connections in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) would be timely because it might offer insights into transfer between receptive and productive skills.

This article investigates learners' difficulties in ESP reading and writing in quest of connections between these skills. Collected statistics on self-assessment and testing data is analyzed, and possible implications for teaching reading and writing are discussed.

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading-writing and writing-reading connections in the first language have shown a number of correlations: between reading achievement and writing ability, between writing quality and reading experience, between reading ability and complexity in writing (Carson, 1994:89). Theoretically, three hypotheses of reading-writing links have been acknowledged: directional, non-directional and bi-directional (Stotsky, 1983:630). Bi-directional hypothesis states that reading and writing are interactive and interdependent and seems the most likely.

There seems to be no theoretical research on either reading-writing or writing-reading relationship in the ESP. The common sense suggests that this relationship in the second language must be understood through the acquisition of literacy in the second language. In other words, it involves 'the fundamental psycholinguistic issue of transfer of the abilities that enable L2 learners to utilize knowledge from one language in acquiring literacy in another' (Carson, 1994:95).

The investigation of reading-writing connections in the second language needs theoretical,

experiential and experimental foundation. English language teachers are well aware of the fact that well-read learners are better writers, and better literacy in the mother tongue helps developing literacy skills in the second language. However, a necessity to gather data on literacy acquisition in a foreign language remains a burning issue.

Reading is a complex cognitive activity, and its development can be promoted by two approaches – extensive and intensive reading practice. Extensive reading is known to develop word recognition and general language proficiency, while intensive reading deals with detailed comprehension and teaching reading strategies.

The teaching & learning of receptive reading skill presents some difficulties. Length of words and sentences in written texts is one of the key difficulties – longer sentences and longer words are more difficult to understand. This phenomenon has been known as the FOG index F , which is defined as $F = 0.4 (A + L)$, here A is the average length of sentences in a text, and L is the number of long words per 100 words. The high value of F hinders learners' comprehension in reading.

Authenticity of reading materials presents another difficulty to ESP learners because no concessions are made to foreign learners who encounter non-simplified content (Harmer, 2001:205). Authentic materials can be extremely de-motivating for students. Negative expectations of reading are often due to previous unsuccessful experiences (Harmer, 2001:208).

There are various ways of addressing the problem of language difficulty. The most common are pre-teaching difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary, encouraging learners to read extensively, to train learners in intensive reading, and to teach reading strategies.

For some inexplicable reasons, learners are basically taught (and tested) skimming and scanning strategies. Skimming and scanning are useful first stages, when a reader decides whether to read a text at all or which parts to read carefully. To develop an independent reader, a number of other strategies are paramount, e.g. inferring, summarizing, checking & monitoring one's comprehension, connecting information from different parts of the text, evaluating and fault-finding. All these strategies involve ability to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups, relations within the sentence, implications – not explicitly stated information, conceptual meaning, understanding relationship in the text structure and parts of a text through lexical-grammatical cohesion devices and indicators in discourse, distinguishing facts from opinions (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/reading>).

Weak students often adopt mistaken strategies that cause reading difficulties. The set of so called SQ3R study skills - the abbreviation stands for the following steps: survey (using a previewing skimming technique), question (formulating questions that will be answered in a text), read, recite (rephrasing the ideas in the one's mind), review (going over the text as a whole) – might be beneficial (Kopeika, 2000:28).

In the teaching of ESP reading and writing, grammar is often ignored because of many misconceptions about the role of grammar. According to Dudley Evans & et. al. (1998:80), 'for reading, where the learners' grammatical weaknesses interfere with comprehension of meaning and form can be taught in context through analysis and explanation. This often includes the verb form, notably tense and voice, modals, particularly in relation to the expression of certainty and uncertainty, connectors, noun compounds and various expressions. If students are expected to present written work, serious weaknesses in grammar require more specific help'.

Another aspect of learning reading & writing includes vocabulary that is needed for comprehension and for production. 'In comprehension, deducing the meaning of vocabulary from the context and from the structure of the actual word is the most important method of learning new vocabulary. For production purposes, storage and retrieval are significant' (Dudley Evans &

et. al., 1998:83).

Alderson (1984, cited by Dudley Evans & Jo St. John, 1998:74) showed that 'poor reading in a foreign language is due in part to poor reading in the L1, together with an inadequate knowledge of the foreign language. Learners need to reach a threshold level of language knowledge before they are able to transfer any L1 skills to their L2 reading tasks'.

The cognitive processes involved in processing a text cannot be ignored. However, learners must be aware of two simultaneous ways of processing a text (Lingzhu, 2003): 'In top-down processing, learners use the prior knowledge to make predictions about the text. In bottom-up processing, learners rely on their linguistic knowledge to recognize linguistic elements – vowels, consonants, words, sentences to do with the construction of meaning'.

Research findings on writing showed the following: a lack of competence in writing in English results more from the lack of composing competence than from the lack of linguistic competence, differences between L1 and L2 writers relate to composing proficiency rather than to L1, and using L1 when writing in L2 frequently concerns vocabulary and enables the L2 writer to sustain the composing process (Krapels, 1994:49).

There are six aspects of written work that learners must pay attention to: textual organization, structure of sentences / clauses, different word networks, paragraphing, spelling, punctuation, and non-standard English (<http://english.unitecnology.ac.nz/links/resourcequery.html>).

The survey of available literature allows to conclude that reading-writing relationship in the ESP has not received proper attention. Researchers display a distinct tendency to investigate the development of either receptive (reading) or productive (writing) skills. The adopted attitude prevails due to complexity of untangling intertwined components of both skills.

Theoretically, 'the fundamental process involved in the second language reading-writing relationship and the relationship between L1 and L2 literacy skills is transfer. Transfer of skills is not automatic, either across languages or across modalities. What this means for the L2 reading-writing relationship is that teaching is important to facilitate transfer' (Carson, 1994:99).

RESEARCH METHODS

In this work, learners' reported verbal (interviews) or written (questionnaires) data were gathered. Verbal data emerge as a useful research tool, although in some cases certain caution may be required. This aspect of research will be discussed later.

The total number of respondents was 250. The respondents were either day-time or extra-mural students of various aptitudes and ages. This sample makes mixed ability groups: day-time students are generally more advanced due to longer instruction time in the ESP while extra-mural students rely more on autonomous learning.

RESEARCH DATA AND DISCUSSION

Research addressed learners' difficulties in reading ESP texts and writing various assignments. Information was gathered either by interviewing students or by requesting to fill in self-assessment questionnaires. Self-assessment results were verified by testing.

Interviewees were requested to elaborate on their reading and writing routines and habits, i.e. planning and carrying out assignments, time spent on doing homework assignments, occurrence of distractions, frequency of using bilingual dictionary, success or failure in comprehension, and types of encountered difficulties and problems. Finally, the collected information was systematized, and its reliability was analyzed by comparing reported results with testing data.

There were two kinds of assignments: reading authentic materials and writing summaries or essays. For reading, authentic texts of various scope and content were offered to learners as homework assignments. The coherent legal ESP passages were approximately 300 – 400 words long and were followed by various comprehension exercises – matching words and definitions, multiple choice, True or False statements, etc. These materials were published in our workbook (Janulevieiene and Kavaliauskiene, 2001), which is available in the library and bookshops at Law University. Writing assignments consisted of summarizing these passages or writing essays on suggested topics. The second type of reading materials comprised 25 unrelated by content, i.e. incoherent sentences (approximately 800 words), each of which consists of abridged complete passages. These passages were published in our earlier workbook aimed at students who want to master legal law enforcement terms (Janulevieiene and Kavaliauskiene, 1999).

Majority of interviewees revealed that they had never been able to complete homework reading without breaks due to various distractions, e.g. phone calls, visitors, breaks for meals, etc. Nevertheless, respondents made an attempt to estimate the reading time as accurately as possible. None of the respondents had been able to complete their assignments without consulting bilingual dictionaries, and only a few learners relied on monolingual Oxford's Advanced Learner's Dictionary. A vast majority preferred to look up each unknown word for the appropriate translation. All in all, approximately 40% of learners found reading time-consuming.

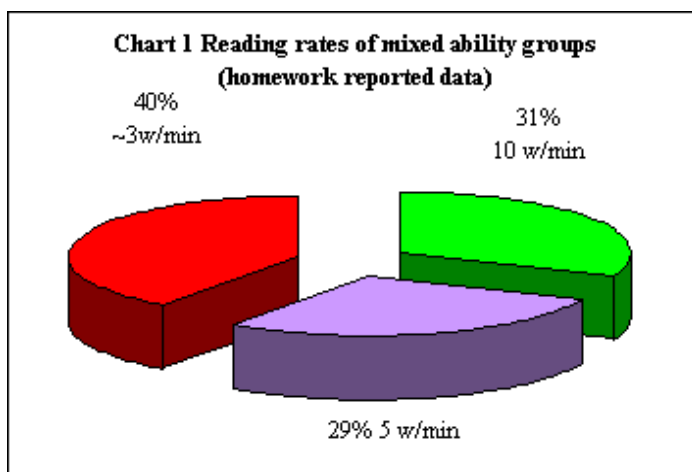
The common practice in writing that interviewees reported is learners' persistence in previously adopted habit – translating ideas from the L1 into the L2, even if they had to summarize a text they had read in English.

In order to measure the reading efficiency it is expedient to introduce a standard of value – a reading rate. The reading rate is a good measure of ability to process information and is defined as a number of words read per minute. The reported data on the time spent on homework reading allow to estimate the average reading rate by dividing the number of the read words by the reading time:

$$RR = NW / TR,$$

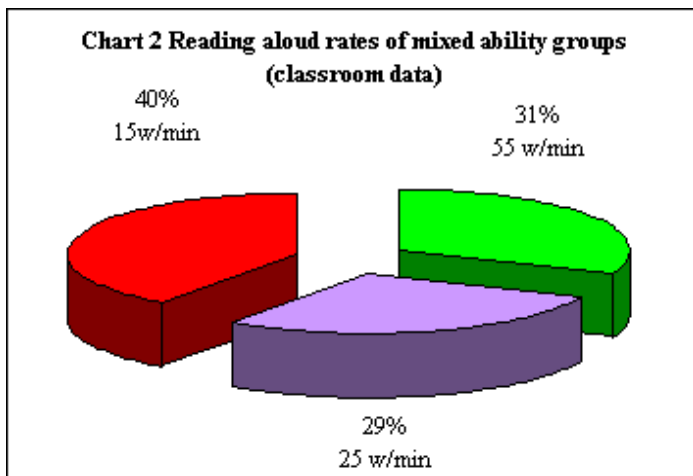
here RR is a reading rate, NW – is the number of words the learner had read, TR – is the time spent on reading these words.

The findings are presented in the pie chart 1.



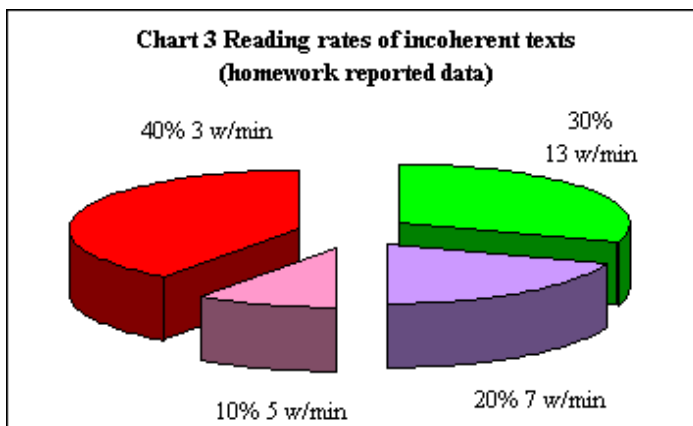
It can be seen that there are three groups of learners, and the reading rates are extremely low for

all groups. The best readers (31% of students) demonstrated ability to read approximately 10 words per minute while weaker readers showed rates of about 3 words per minute (40% of interviewees) and 5 words per minute (29% of interviewees).



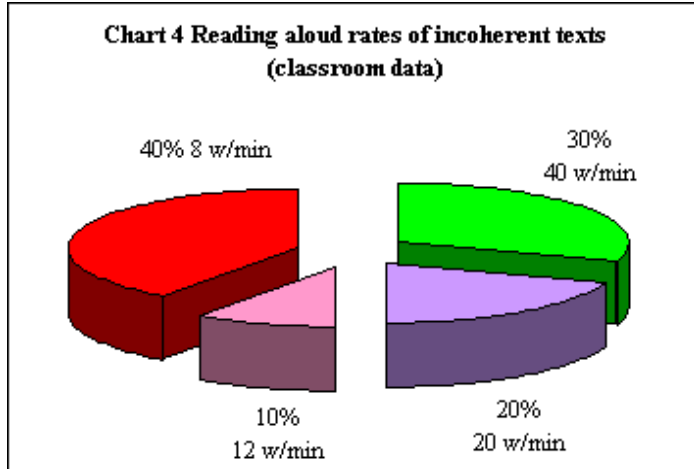
These results on learners' reading rates look staggering and incredible. In order to find some reliable explanation, an experiment of reading aloud was set up. Learners of different aptitudes were requested to read some ESP excerpts of similar difficulty for 1 minute. Reading rate was determined by calculating the number of read words. The average data on reading aloud rates are shown in the pie chart 2. The reading rates in this chart are approximately 5 times higher in all groups of respondents: 31% of learners read on average 55 words per minute, 29% - 25 words per minute, and 40% - 15 words per minute.

The data on the reading rates of incoherent texts are shown in the chart 3. The rates in the pie chart 3 were estimated using the reported data by interviewees on the time they spent on homework reading (similarly as in the chart 1).



Here, there is a slightly different distribution of reading rates. There are four groups with discriminate rates: 30% of respondents read about 13 words per minute, 20% - 7 words per minute, 10% - 5 words per minute, and 40% - just about 3 words per minute.

Similarly, an investigation of reading aloud incoherent texts was carried out, and these results are shown in the pie chart 4. Likewise, reading aloud rates of incoherent passages are higher than those estimated from reported data on homework reading. The distribution of groups is the same but reading aloud rates vary between 40 words per minute to 8 words per minute.



What is a possible interpretation of these findings? On the one hand, in homework assignments, learners are required to carry out some comprehension exercises, and they use bilingual dictionaries for looking up the meanings of unfamiliar words, which is a time-consuming procedure and slows down the reading. Thus, a reading rate in the charts 1 and 3 does not reflect the reading itself but rather processing the information. On the other hand, just reading aloud in the classroom does not require any processing of information. Therefore, reading seems an easier task and does not take as long as doing homework assignments. Difficulties occurred, though, if learners were asked to translate passages that they had read aloud. Thus doing comprehension exercises notably slows down the process of reading.

Necessity to accomplish comprehension exercises impedes the process of reading because 'cognitive processes work less efficiently through the second language. L2 learners have 'cognitive deficits' with reading that are not caused by lack of language ability but by difficulties with processing information in L2' (Cook, 1996:75).

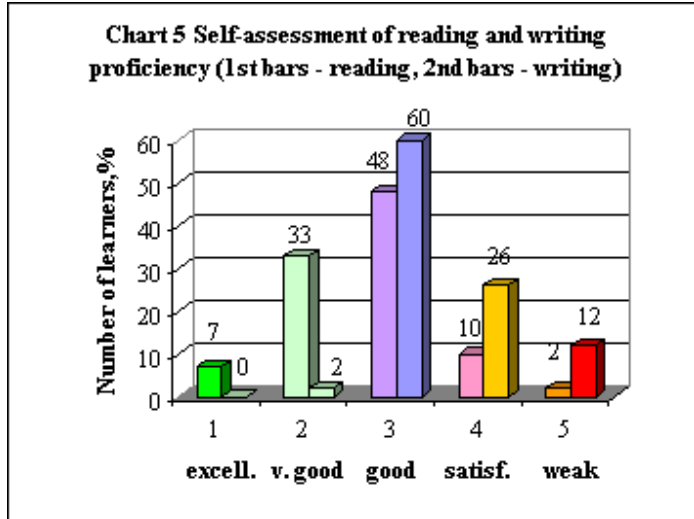
The issue of respondents' difficulties in reading can be formulated by quoting the most common interviewees' complaint: 'unable to grasp the meaning in spite of knowing all the words'. The list of

systematized problems in descending order is:

- unfamiliar vocabulary & lexical phrases,
- textual organization,
- sentence structure,
- tenses & passive voice,
- word order.

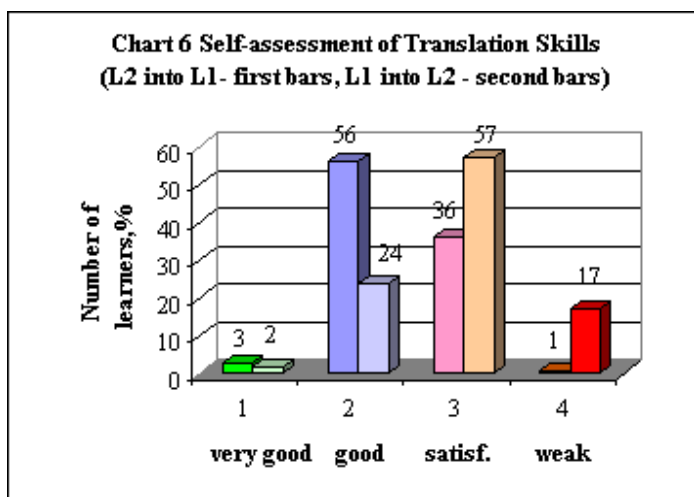
Learners' self-assessment of proficiency in various skills was carried out by administering written questionnaires. Learner's self-assessment is known as an effective tool to elucidate problem areas.

The bar chart 5 presents the comparison of proficiency in reading versus writing skill. Proficiency in reading is presented by first columns and proficiency in writing – by second columns. Only 12% of learners admit inadequate – weak and satisfactory - performance in reading, while a vast majority believe in having reasonable proficiency – good to excellent. Fallacy is easily explained – poor reading skills are easy to conceal. Interestingly, weak readers think they are better writers (two last sets of columns), while better readers think they are poorer writers (two first sets of columns). Good readers regard themselves as good writers (middle columns). All in all, the two thirds of respondents regard their writing performance favourably being under a delusion that writing is an almost inbuilt skill.



Nevertheless, the presented data in the chart 5 should be regarded with caution. In practice, respondents' viewpoint of writing ability changes as soon as learners face a task of writing an essay or summary. The most common students' complaint is 'I do not even know how / what to write in my mother tongue – it is impossible for me to describe it in English'. In other words, such statements reveal lack of literacy in the L1.

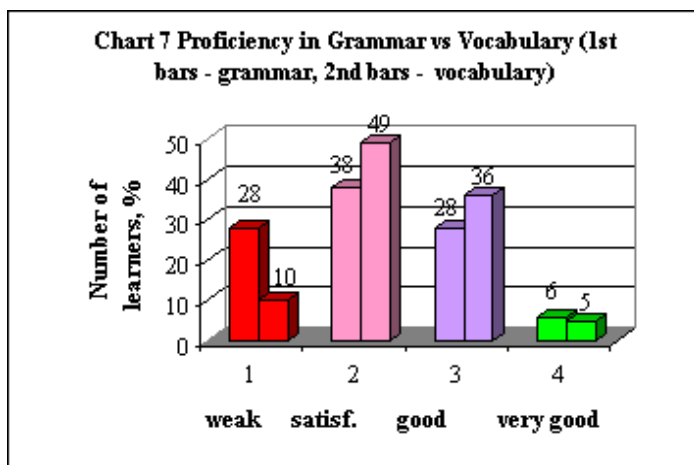
Ability to translate from L2 into L1 and from L1 into L2 is an essential skill which is closely related to both reading and writing. The bar chart 6 shows learners' self-assessment of their translation skills.



First columns in each proficiency level depict ability to translate from the L2 into the L1, and second columns – from the L1 into L2. Just a few learners believe in being very good at translation both ways (number 1 on X axis). More than half students (56%) assess their proficiency in translation from L2 into L1 as good (number 2 on X axis), and over third (36%) – as satisfactory (number 3 on X axis). Situation is reversed for translating from L1 into L2: only 24% are good (number 2 on X axis), and 57% -satisfactory (number 3 on X axis). 17% of respondents admit being weak at translating from the L1 into the L2 (number 4 on X axis).

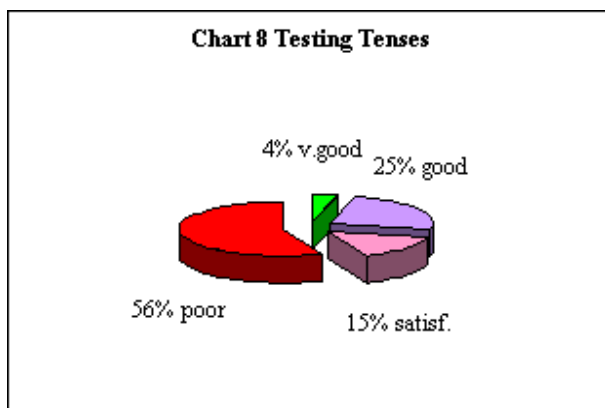
The obtained results reflect the current situation: translating into L2 is more problematic than vice versa, and learners are aware of this difficulty. A possible cause is respondents' inability to retrieve appropriate vocabulary. Knowledge of vocabulary is thought to be a cornerstone of receptive and productive performance in ESP.

Learners' self-assessment of grammar versus vocabulary is shown in the bar chart 7. First columns show self-assessment of grammar, and second columns – of vocabulary.



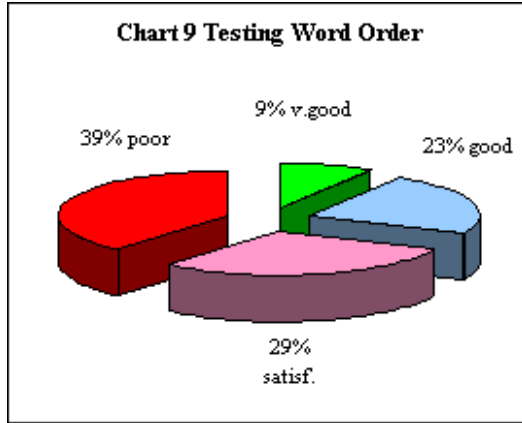
First, let us analyse carefully the data in the chart 7. Only a few learners think that they are very good at either grammar or vocabulary (number 4 on X axis). 66% of respondents altogether (28% and 38%, respectively) are aware of their cognitive deficits in grammar and regard it as weak or satisfactory (first bars at numbers 1 and 2 on X axis), and 59% of respondents (10% and 49%, respectively) feel their knowledge of vocabulary is inadequate (second bars at numbers 1 and 2 on X axis). Interestingly, for 41% respondents, (numbers 3 and 4 on X axis) vocabulary does not present essential difficulties. All in all, only about the third of students assess their vocabulary and grammar as good. How realistic the respondents are about their evaluation of knowledge will be discussed later.

In order to compare learners' self-assessment with their real proficiency, the results on testing some particular grammar points, i.e. tenses and word order, are depicted in the pie charts 8 and 9 below. The number of students who had done these tests was 52.



It can be seen in the chart 8 that 56% of students failed to use the right tenses in a grammar test. According to the self-assessment chart 7, only 28% of students feel their knowledge of grammar is weak. Nevertheless, twice as many failed this test.

Furthermore, in the same self-assessment chart 7, 38% of respondents are supposed to be able to perform satisfactorily – in reality there were just 15%. The number of well-performing students was 29% against self-assessed 34%, which makes quite a reasonable agreement.



The right word order is another challenge to learners. The chart 9 clearly shows that putting words in the right order is a hard task for 39% of learners. The third can cope with it quite well, and 29% - satisfactorily.

Summing up, the factual report data reveal that poor reading skills – slow processing during reading, insufficient vocabulary, deficit in grammar knowledge - cause poor writing habits that a vast majority of respondents are not aware of.

Undoubtedly, other teachers face similar problems even if their statistics data might differ from mine. In order to facilitate acquisition of the better receptive (reading) and productive (writing) skills, teachers must train students to use effective strategies.

Some techniques on training learners with the objective of developing essential skills in writing & reading (not just commonly taught and tested skimming and scanning) and building up active vocabulary are described in the section of Research Implications which follows the Conclusions..

CONCLUSIONS

Three important facts emerged:

- learners' reading rates are low,
- writing (or reading) involves translating ideas from L1 (or L2) into L2 (or L1),
- no statistical correlation between reading and writing skills has been ascertained.

Research results have shown that learners' difficulties in reading and writing are triggered by insufficient vocabulary and inadequate knowledge of sentence structure, tenses and textual organization. Statistically, no tangible correlation in reading-writing relationship has been detected.

Respondents' self-assessment data of reading and writing skills should be considered with caution – results do not reflect the real state of affairs. This point has been proved by testing learners' written work and reading comprehension.

Learners seem unaware of their lacks in good practice strategies in reading (writing). For transfer of language skills to occur learners need to reach a threshold level of language knowledge. Teachers' objectives are to help learners in acquisition of language knowledge and train students in developing skills of reading and writing efficiently.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: TECHNIQUES FOR TRAINING READING & WRITING SKILLS

Learners' difficulties in reading, translation and writing are caused by either limited vocabulary or its inappropriate usage. This point is emphasized by R. Buckmaster (2003): 'the most important 'skill' is a very large vocabulary'.

There are numerous techniques for teaching vocabulary, reading and writing skills. Hereinafter, a short overview of some beneficial techniques is presented.

Lexical Approach Activities

Objectives:

exploring authentic text, drawing learners' attention to lexical items, teaching reading strategies, free and summary writing

Lexical approach activities are based on reading texts that provide classroom materials for exploring lexical approach. The ways of exploiting a selected text and drawing learners' attention to the lexical items are highlighted thereafter through the usual - pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading –activities.

Pre-reading activities are directly related to the text. The most useful is a skill of prediction. Students are expected to work in pairs and predict the story from the title, pictures (if any available), brainstorm related vocabulary, predict key-words, predict from the topical sentences (if given).

While-reading activities involve the sub-skills of skimming for the gist and scanning for specific information.

A variation : Jigsaw Activity

Post-reading activities involve answering comprehension questions (e.g. multiple choice, True or False, matching words and definitions, matching paragraphs and summarising sentences, etc.). The most challenging activity is for students to write a few questions, swap them with peers and answer their peers' questions. The latter allows to introduce speaking into a reading class.

Jigsaw Reading Activity

Objectives:

understanding textual organization, reflecting on grammatical clauses & conjunctions, promoting learners' cooperation

Jigsaw reading involves putting together the excerpts of the same text and lends itself to teaching text organization (Rees, 2003).

Jigsaw reading might be used as a more challenging activity. In jigsaw reading, a text is split into 2, 3 or 4 parts which are given to small groups. Students have to put the story together by finding right clues and reflecting on clauses, conjunctions and textual organization.

Jigsaw reading is an effective way to introduce speaking into a reading class – it provides a novel opportunity for genuine communication similar to real life exchange of information between people. Teachers have to make sure that students do not read their peers' passages.

Re-Translation Activity

Objectives:

finding grammatical patterns and lexical items in sentences, seeking accuracy and authenticity, developing learners' cooperation

Select two short ESP passages which do not contain new vocabulary. Divide the class into two teams of equal number of pairs, and give pairs in each team different passages of similar difficulty to translate into the mother tongue. After having finished translation, students exchange their

translated texts between groups. Next task is to retranslate their peers' work back into English. Make sure students do not have original texts at this stage. Finally, learners sit next to their peers and compare translated texts with original texts. Discussion of grammar patterns, vocabulary usage, accuracy of translation, etc. and resolving any misunderstandings that may have affected the accuracy of translations and finding an appropriate equivalents is of the paramount importance.

Mother tongue in reading activity

Objectives:

Consolidating accurate translations & meanings of lexical items both ways L1? L2

The role of the native language in learning ESP is more important than native speakers of English are inclined to admit. An adequate translation from / back into the mother tongue is a vital productive skill. It was shown that 90% of learners want the L1 to be used for explaining difficult concepts, and 74% of students want to have new vocabulary defined in their native language (Janulevieiene and Kavaliauskiene, 2000:9).

Use of the native language in reading activities must involve translation of difficult passages with emphasis on differences between two languages. This activity is invaluable for developing bilingual users.

Finding grammatical patterns in sentences

Objectives:

Raising awareness on how language works, reflecting on grammatical patterns, discovering rules

This activity is aimed at practising the strategy of discovering rules and reflecting on grammar patterns. The examples of sentences may be taken from any ESP text and might include any grammar points – tenses, gerunds, passive voice, conditional sentences, etc.

Students work in pairs or small groups. Ask learners to reflect on chosen sentences, discuss involved structures, elicit the rules and formulate them in writing. Each group reads their formulated rules. Then students write down their own sentences according to the rule. Groups exchange the written work and analyse whether it is correct.

Reading Aloud Activity

Objectives:

Dictation & self-dictation, writing dictated material, understanding intonation, stress, pronunciation of unfamiliar sound-combinations

The teaching English as a foreign language myth 'that reading aloud should not be done in the classroom as native speakers do not read aloud and it is an unauthentic task' has prevailed for thirty years, although it is a false belief (Buckmaster, 2003).

Reading aloud is not necessarily a self-contained activity. It can be successfully used for dictation of reading (or listening) comprehension questions. In turns, each pair of students is given either reading (or listening) comprehension sentences (or questions) to dictate to the whole class. 'Writers' are very demanding to the dictators' proper pronunciation, spelling (if necessary) and punctuation.

The important advantage of this activity is that reading aloud trains listeners to cope with indistinctly pronounced words, fast speed of reading, unfamiliar sound-combinations, lexis and collocations.

Activity of ‘Unpacking Sentences’

Objectives:

simplifying sophisticated sentences, formulating questions, reflecting on grammatical structure & tenses & vocabulary, spotting lexical items

To my great regret, I was unable to recollect where I had learnt this activity or who the author was. Therefore, my sincere apologies for not quoting references.

The essential part of this activity is to simplify long statements into a number of short sentences or questions. That is why the activity is named ‘unpacking’.

An example

The British detectives have arrested forty people involved in a marriage fraud designed to give scores of illegal immigrants European Union status.

The following questions could be asked: Who has arrested people? How many people have the British detectives arrested? What crime were people involved in? What is a marriage fraud? What is European Union status? Why do illegal immigrants want European Union status?

The demonstration sentence is comparatively simple. The statements that learners face in legal texts are much more difficult to grasp. Ability to divide the vague sentences into short logical parts and formulate questions and answers in accordance with the content is an important skill that helps comprehension.

Self-Correction of Written Work

Objectives:

Identifying types of errors in one’s written work, developing language awareness, encouraging learner autonomy

Learners’ self-correction or peers’ correction of written work activities are helpful in raising language awareness, spotting one’s own errors and taking responsibility for one’s learning. The procedure employed in learner self-correction of written work has been described in detail in (Kavaliauskiene, 2003).

Recurring mistakes in written work

Objectives:

Identifying recurring errors in one’s written work, raising language awareness, promoting learner autonomy

Activity encourages students to reconsider their previous errors in writing by making lists of their common mistakes and grouping the mistakes according to the type (vocabulary, tenses, spelling, prepositions, etc.). Activity invites learners’ opinions and discussions on possible remedies.

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