

Connecting Reading and Writing in College EFL Courses

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Traditionally, teachers of English as a second or foreign language have tended to teach reading and writing separately from each other. However, some specialists have argued that reading and writing are closely connected and should be taught together. In this article, theories and research on reading/writing connection are briefly discussed, followed by a variety of recommended pedagogical applications and teaching activities for college EFL writing courses.

Introduction

English acquisition for EFL students is mainly developed through reading and composing English texts. To help students acquire abilities of reading and writing, curricula are usually designed separately under the belief that these two are totally different language skills. This division unfortunately overlooks the interactive relationship between reading and writing and fails to see the contributions that the connection of reading and writing can make on students' language acquisition. To overcome the shortcomings, it is therefore crucial to discuss the rationale and benefits of linking these two aspects of language learning in English instruction and provide a more concrete picture of how to apply these concepts in actual teaching situations. In this article, theories and research on L1 and L2 reading and writing connections are briefly discussed, followed by suggestions on pedagogical applications of L2 reading/writing connection and a variety of teaching activities for a college EFL writing class.

Connecting Reading and Writing

The reading/writing connection has its origin in L1 or native language contexts. In the 80's, some scholars had considered reading and writing as similar cognitive processes in which readers/authors interact with the texts. For example, Tierney and Pearson (1983) believed that "at the heart of understanding the reading/writing connection one must begin to view reading and writing as essentially similar processes of meaning construction" (p. 568). In the same vein, Petrosky (1982) noted that "reading, responding, and composing are aspects of understanding, and theories that attempt to account for them outside of their interactions with each other run the serious risk of building reductive modules of human understanding" (p. 20).

In L2 literacy contexts, Krashen's (1984) argument that "it is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture" (p. 20, cited in Hirvela, 2004) paves the way leading writing researchers and instructors to the vision of reading/writing connection. He claims that reading, which builds the knowledge base of written texts, helps L2 learners acquire necessary language constructs such as grammatical structures and discourse rules for writing, and facilitates the process of language acquisition. While Krashen's viewpoints recognize the contributions that reading can make to writing, it is reader-response theory that brings L2 literacy researchers to see reading and writing both as processes of composing. Reader-response theory claims that the meaning conveyed by the texts is determined by the reader instead of the author. In relation to reading/writing connection, reader-response theory "serves as a valuable tool for privileging and investigating students' composing processes as readers, processes that can both influence and overlap with their composing processes as writers" (Hirvela, 2004, p. 53).

Considering both reading and writing as processes in which students interact with texts meaningfully, researchers suggested ESL or L2 teachers need to utilize strategic methods to integrate the concept into teaching. Reading to write and writing to read are the two facilitative strategies for instruction in L2 literacy classrooms.

First, reading to write is based on the notion that reading supports and shapes L2 learners' writing through acquisition of language input when students are performing reading tasks. Reading is not merely helpful for enhancing L2 learners' writing ability in a general sense. Also, through reading, students are given opportunities in writing classrooms to acquire knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structures, or rhetorical features of texts. Pedagogically, there are numerous teaching practices suggested for reading to write, including mining, writerly reading, rhetorical reading, and modeling approach, and extensive reading and free/voluntary reading.

On the other hand, writing to read serves as a technique which changes the goals of teachers' instruction from helping students answer comprehension checks correctly to encouraging students' meaningful interaction with written texts, and supports students to experience reading as a composing process. Writing in reading classrooms can take place in a variety of forms such as underlining portion of texts, making comments, raising questions, or even scribbling some marks or pictures that are only comprehensible to readers themselves.

Applications of the Reading/Writing Connection

The concept of the reading/writing connection can be manifested in many instructional activities. In this section, a sample course is introduced to demonstrate practical applications of reading/writing connection in EFL contexts. In particular, it is targeting college students in English writing classes in Taiwan.

The Context

College students in Taiwan are required to take English classes to develop English reading and writing ability. These classes are normally three-credit hour courses, with each class having an average of 40 to 50 students. In general, there are a total of 30 sessions in every semester, with two sessions each of the 15 weeks.

Course Objectives

In the writing course, students will be exposed to a wide array of text types to develop fundamental English reading and writing skills. They will also learn how to take advantage of the reading/writing connection to improve their language proficiency.

Reading Materials

Based on the goals of instruction, three types of texts, including literature, online texts from the Internet, and essays and articles from books, newspapers or magazines are recommended to use in the courses. In doing so, students are able to engage in a variety of tasks from personal, pleasure reading to more specific academic literacy. The materials and how to use them are discussed in detail as follows:

- In the first five weeks of the class, children's literature such as "Charlotte's Web" is assigned as the required text to read. This kind of book is chosen because it is full of imagination and easy to read for EFL college students. Besides, it requires no cultural-bounded knowledge to understand the story. Also, the characters in the novel conversing in different tones, styles, and vivid expressions, so students are able to see diverse use of language in an interesting way. When students respond to the stories, they are engaging in authentic communicative tasks by which students develop language abilities through searching for appropriate vocabulary and syntactic structures to express their ideas and feelings.
- In the next five weeks of the course, texts from the Internet are utilized as major teaching materials. In analysis of Taiwanese college students' needs, such websites as those established by news media – BBC World Service: Learning English <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/> and The New York Times Learning Network <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/> – are found to be beneficial for student learning. This is because, most students already have an idea of what is in the news by reading newspapers in Chinese or watching TV. Reading English news stories would make students feel more connected to the texts as the reading activity is supported by students' background knowledge. Also, these kinds of websites provide simplified news stories, news summaries, lessons of learning grammar and vocabulary from news, as well as interactive features for readers to respond to the news stories. Through using these websites, students are provided opportunities to practice both reading and writing simultaneously.

- Materials suggested to use in the last several weeks of the course are essays about specific topics or descriptive texts from books, newspapers, or magazines. The reason for putting thematic essays and articles in the last few weeks is to postpone students' reading and writing for academic purposes until they have acquired sufficient literacy skills through the training at the previous stages. Through reading and writing about novels and online news stories while engaging in various activities, students should be able to improve their EFL literacy skills and become well prepared to read difficult articles with academic purposes.

Instructional Activities

There are numerous reading/writing pedagogical practices which can be employed in EFL writing courses. It would be useful to categorize these practices into writing-to-read and reading-to-write activities/assignments based on general introductory definitions and functions, though these activities may overlap for pedagogical purposes.

Writing-to-read

1. **Writing-Before-You-Read (Spack, 1985).** Activities of writing-before-you-read are suggested to be implemented in the initial stage of reading, in an attempt to solicit students' experiences of reading different types of texts, their attitudes toward certain topics or issues, and the writing difficulties they experience. For example, students can write about their experience of living on a farm, reading an English or Chinese novel, or their impressions about a headline story in Taiwan or around the world.
2. **Keeping a Reading Journal.** Students can keep a double-entry or dialectical notebook which helps them become conscious of their reactions. In these notebooks, students copy passages that have particular significance for them in one column, and then respond to them in the other (Zamel, 1992). The responses to the passages can take such forms as summaries, marginal notations, reflective comments in relation to the passages, or expressions of students' ideas.
3. **Summarizing.** Summarizing is an effective technique making comprehension a more meaningful process through constructing written texts in their own words. It can be employed in different sessions, such as when students are asked to write summaries of chapters of a novel they read, news stories, and academic articles. Not only will students' writing proficiency be enhanced through the writing exercises, but their reading strategies of selecting important information of the texts will be reinforced.

Reading-to-Write.

1. **Mining** - It is a strategic approach that digs out valuable language resources such as grammar, which supports student writing. While reading different types of texts, students are encouraged to pay attention to and learn consciously about grammatical and lexical features of the texts, organization of the articles, and expressions which are unfamiliar to the students. Through the practice, students will improve their reading skills, and, at the same time, build the foundation of future writing.
2. **Free/Voluntary Reading** - It encourages students to engage in reading activities outside the classroom and under less structured conditions than in extensive reading (Hirvela, 2004). The main purpose of this approach is to help students develop pleasurable reading experience and become more motivated readers. For example, after students have finished reading a novel or have obtained enough knowledge about learning English by taking advantage of online texts, other literary works and useful websites are introduced. Students can get extra points when they demonstrate their efforts on engaging in reading activities outside the classroom. In doing so, students will become acquainted with reading and writing about various texts depending on their interests and thus become more confident in their English literacy.

Conclusion

Traditionally, teachers of English as a second or foreign language have tended to teach reading and writing separately from each other. However, reading and writing do share similar properties and students are more likely to benefit from the instruction that makes reading and writing activities go hand-in-hand and supplement each other. Applying this notion to actual

teaching situations would not be a difficult challenge when EFL writing teachers take into account students' needs, are aware of the advantages of the reading/writing connection, and carefully design teaching practices. Given that the separation of reading and writing instruction in EFL contexts makes students perceive reading as a decoding process and writing as only a task of constructing grammatically correct essays, it is especially vital for EFL teachers, through the reading/writing connection, to provide students with abundant opportunities and resources to help them become reflective readers and writers. More importantly, students need to be instructed to realize that both reading and writing are acts with communicative purposes and are inseparable. Only by doing so can students improve language proficiency through reading and writing activities, and develop these two literacy skills in a meaningful way.

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