

THE ROLE OF READING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS' WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to describe the role of reading in improving the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' writing skills. The attempt is made to analyze the relationship between writing and reading in the process of learning a foreign language and particularly to highlight the importance of reading in the development of writing skills. The article suggests a systematic review of the scientific literature related to incorporating reading into the process of writing skills development. Additionally, the paper identifies strengths and weaknesses of this approach that should be taken into consideration by teachers in their writing classrooms.

Keywords: reading; writing skills; EFL learners.

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1. Introduction

Studying English language implies acquiring its vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, as well as developing four language skills, which are reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Among these skills writing is the most challenging and unique because it involves “a practice and knowledge of other three language skills” (Klimova, 2013). Writing can be defined as “... the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse... and the expression of ideas” (Abu-Ghararah, 1998, p.87).

Writing is not a simple undertaking, as various people might consider; this is a noticeably difficult skill in comparison with further language skills that can require less endeavor (Shawish, 2009). Developing this skill is essential as it contains various advantages such as stimulating communication, improving thinking skills, providing and receiving feedback and being able to express thoughts by logical arguments. It provides a link between the writer and the reader during the communication process. This is fundamental for the transmission of information, knowledge and experience. Even though nowadays scientific literature contains a vast amount of research on the ways of writing skills development, still it remains to be quite a difficult task for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners.

As writing is not a natural skill, it is essential to provide learners with explicit instructions while teaching it (Aronoff & Rees-Miller, 2007). One of the ways to enhance writing skills development can be extensive use of reading materials. Specifically, the present article focuses on the relationship between writing and reading processes and attempts to highlight the importance of reading in the development of writing skills. Additionally, the authors point out the strengths and weaknesses of incorporating reading into writing that can be useful for English teachers in their writing classes.

2. The relationship between writing and reading

Over the past two decades, a number of researchers have explored the relationship between reading and writing and the role of reading in the development of writing both in L1 and L2 contexts. These relationships were considered from both the cognitive and social

perspectives of learning, as well as from the direction of influence (Stotsky, 1983; Carson & Leki, 1993; Langer & Flihan, 2000; Belcher & Hirvela, 2001). One of the earlier studies belong to Stotsky (1983), who provided a detailed and systematic review of scientific research, related to the bi-directional reading-on-writing and writing-on-reading influence in L1 contexts. The researcher found that “while a large body of theoretical and experimental research in writing focused on methodological issues, very little research in writing has examined the influence of reading instruction or reading experience on the development of writing ability” (Stotsky, 1983).

In later works the researchers also call for the “renewed focus on the ways in which reading and writing interact in relation to the contexts and social relations in which they are embedded” (Langer & Flihan, 2000). Although most papers describe these interrelations within the scope of L1 setting, we can observe similar socio-cognitive processes in the development of EFL learners’ writing skills. Therefore, the nature of these interrelations can serve as a key to understanding how to use them effectively in EFL writing classrooms.

The researchers claim that until the 1970-s, writing and reading were not considered integrated. They were considered as separate, possibly related, language processes. Partly, this is a result of the fact that the concepts of writing and reading have grown out of different traditions. Writing as an academic subject has its roots in the classical rhetoric of Aristotle and was aimed at educated people and taught in universities after mastering the main part of the program. Rhetoric emphasized grammar, diction, word choice. By the end of the 19-th century, traditional ideas were replaced by practical and functional views of writing. Interest in the writing process led to the study of the relationship between the writing process, the student and the text (Langer & Flihan, 2000).

Undoubtedly, reading in a second language is also a complicated and laborious task for various students. Although reading has been a particularly affluent field of investigations for

first and second language reading professionals over the past few decades, which has also provided a wealth of precious research and information, it still persists a mystery among reading scholars.

Changes occurred in the 1980s, when scientists started to consider the relationship between writing and reading, analyzing them as social and cognitive processes.

When asked to justify the relationship between writing and reading, it is natural to assume that good writers are good readers. For example, Stotsky (1983) presented a number of experimental studies, which identified that “the better a student writes, the more he reads” and vice versa.

This is also suggested in the transactional theory of writing by Rosenblatt (2004), in which the writer, who is the primary reader of the text, makes a deal with the text appearing on the page. What Rosenblatt depicts as “author reading” suggests that the best writers are also the best critical readers, able to gauge the effectiveness of their own work. Other studies on the relationship between writing and reading, which became popular in the 1980s and 1990s, propose that there are many advantages of combining written assignments with reading.

However, there are quite opposite views regarding a statement that good readers become good writers. For instance, Yoshimura (2009) considers that “especially in EFL context, many students develop into very competent readers without developing their writing ability to the same degree”. In this regard, Grabe (1991) points out two important differences between reading and writing: deliberateness and focus of reflection. Specifically, while reading requires more automaticity of sub processes, writing requires more deliberate awareness. While the main goal of reading is to reflect on meaning and comprehension, reflecting on language is very important in writing to make sure that ideas are expressed appropriately. Thus, while reading and writing share constructs and may support each other, there are differences between the two abilities and reading ability does not always transfer to writing ability. Therefore, it is

very important to understand that reading is helpful in developing writing skills only under definite conditions.

2.1 “The extensive reading” hypothesis

“The extensive reading hypothesis” by Grabe (1991) assumes that reading extensively improves writing ability. He concludes that voluntary intensive reading during a long period of time facilitates the overall literacy development of EFL learners. Some works emphasize the impact of intensive reading on the development of grammatical accuracy and complexity, as well as coherence and cohesion in paragraph writing (Chuenchaichon, 2011). Others claim the positive impact on rhetoric organization, language use and content information (Plakans, 2009; Yoshimura, 2009). Chuenchaichon (2011) notes that there are several studies of L1 and L2 which mention that students read from the source text (i.e. a text that is related to the topic they will write about) in order to improve the writing skills.

Theoretical and practical research proves that writing and reading are activities that are based on creating meaning. When a person writes or reads, there is a continuous formation of meaning and ideas. Some scholars, such as Smith (2009), "talk about the writer as a reader and the reader as a writer." When creating a work or a passage, the writer tries to put himself in the shoes of his readers and analyze the text from their point of view. The reader, in turn, not only reads, but also tries to anticipate the development of the text, assesses the structure and style. Both activities use similar types of knowledge necessary for creating meaning: knowledge about language, content, genre, style, organization and structure, pragmatics (the goals of the writer and the reader), and knowledge about the relationship (between the writer and the reader). Rubin and Hansen (1986) suggested that the various types of knowledge that can be gained from learning to read could be transferred to learning to write. For example, it was found that using literary examples brings great benefits for developing writing skills (Stotsky, 1983).

It was proved that in training aimed at improving writing skills reading is "just as effective as or even more effective than grammar tasks or additional writing practice."

According to Carson and Leki (1993), 'reading can be, and in academic settings nearly always is, the basis for writing'. It is important to note that university students regularly write different types of essays leaning towards the source texts. Therefore, as Spack (1988) pointed out, "conceivably the majority of valuable skill English teachers can engage students in is the complex capability to compose from other texts, a main part of their writing experiences". Accordingly, Grabe (1991) noted the importance and necessity of co-teaching reading and writing in advanced academic training. Over the past period, students who have problems with their writing may have trouble reading, since the function of composing from sources begins with reading texts. Many difficulties in reading those texts considerably involve on composing about them, as students write in response to what they read and how they interpret it.

Although these two skills are measured separate skills since reading is passive and writing is productive, reading and writing complement each other. As Johnson (2008, cited in Eisterhold, 1990, p. 7) believes, "the relationship between these two skills is that reading helps students become enhanced writers by establishing them in contact with the rules of grammar." Consequently, they expand language structure, grammar and enlarge their vocabulary stock; therefore, reading in writing class is understood as the suitable input for acquiring writing skills, as it is believed that "reading passages will somehow function as the main model for which writing skills can be studied or is at least concluded".

Brown (1987, p. 331) also mentions that students can get important ideas about how and what they should write, which may help them develop the content of their writings by reading and studying the various relevant types of text. In other words, reading can provide various models for writing. The same view is supported by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p. 158) who assert that numerous writing courses and most auto-didactic strategies in writing assume

the use of well-written excerpts from literature, or an excerpt written by others, as models for one's own writing. Yoshimura (2009) also compared the students' writings before and after using the model text and with the help of self-developed check-lists identified the effectiveness of the source text. Thereby, various writing lessons begin with reading texts, analyzing them, considering them as models for writing, or using them as ready patterns. It is important to note that for these reasons, reading, which plays a decisive role in developing the ability to write, seems to be a prerequisite for creating good writers.

2.2 Limitations of the approach

Second/foreign language writing is a complex skill and teachers may need to use a variety of methods and approaches to best ensure that their students' abilities improve over time. It is natural that the "reading-for-writing" approach is not the only one in teaching writing to EFL learners. The most well-researched and well-described ones seem to be "product and process" approaches (Steele, 1992; Gabrielatos, 2002; Neupane, 2017). The difference between them is clearly described in the following table by Steele (2004, p.1).

Table 1: Product and process writing: a comparison

Product approach	Process approach
Imitate model text	Text as a resource for comparison
Organization of ideas are more important than ideas themselves	Ideas as starting point
One draft	More than one draft
Features highlighted including controlled practice of those features	More global, focused on purpose, theme, text type i.e. reader is emphasized
Individual	Collaborative

Emphasis on end product	Emphasis on creative process
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As it can be seen from the literature, reviewed in this article, the results of read-to-write research tend to emphasize the crucial role of source texts in developing writing skills. Using the source text as a model resembles the “product approach” of teaching writing, which “involves the presentation of a model text, which is discussed and analyzed” (Klimova, 2013). It is evident, that product approach has some limitations. “Under the influence of product approach, the writing task is seen as decontextualized format; it ignores context and audience, and highlights the learner’s final piece of work instead of how is produced” (Hasan & Akhand, 2010).

In this regard, it should be pointed that alongside the strengths, considered above, using the “reading-into-writing” method seems to have one drawback. Using purely “product approach” leads to copying the structure of the source text, does not enhance critical thinking and conscious content development; consequently, similar limitations can be referred to using “reading for writing” approach. However, Chuenchaichon (2011) explored the impact on writing development of texts dealing with topics different from those to be written about but belonging to the same genre. In other words, he explored the use of intensive reading through a ‘reading into writing method’ by using special instructions and activities based on the readings. “This allowed students to notice, among other things, the correct use of grammar, how to compose different types of sentences, how to organise ideas within a text and make logical links between sentences”. In this case, the researcher gained positive results through combining reading-to writing with the process approach.

Therefore, only thorough consideration of various related factors and combination of various approaches can help to appropriately balance the reading in the development of writing skills. “Such a complementary use of both approaches would help students to be authors rather

than copiers, and so have the potential benefit of integrating critical thinking into their academic writing” (Hasan & Akhand, 2010).

Since the reading-to-write approach has some similarities with the product approach, it may seem somewhat contradictory to emphasize the importance of the former while criticizing the latter. In fact, it should be kept in mind that only the thoughtful balance between all approaches ensures the effectiveness of them. Thus, “reading for writing” implies extra-curricular reading, which can serve not only as a model for future writings, but provide contentious information, widen the learners worldview, extend their knowledge about life in general and the subjects of future works in particular.

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