



# Second Language Perspectives on Reading in the Writing Classroom

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The ESL teaching profession is on the brink of an important new understanding of the connections between reading and writing. For many years reading and writing in ESL classrooms were taught separately and as technical skills. Reflecting audiolingual methodology, these two language acts were thought of as consisting of component language subskills that could be taught one by one until the student had mastered all the pieces and, consequently, reading and writing. In this formulation, reading was rightly understood as a process distinct from writing, but the distinction was too sharply drawn and failed to recognize that the two skills share similar cognitive processes of meaning construction. In the second language classroom composition classroom reading typically played no more than a secondary role, serving mainly as linguistic model for rhetorical patterns and as a content material for writing assignments.

**Keywords:** English as a Second Language (ESL), Shared Process, Shared Knowledge, Cognition, Reading , Writing.

## Introduction

Reading, like writing, begins in confusion, anxiety and uncertainty...it is driven by chance and intuition as well as by deliberate strategy and conscious intent....certainty and authority are postures, features of a performance that is achieved through an act of writing, not qualities of vision that precede such a performance.( Bartholomae & Petrosky,1986, p.21)

Over the last 15 years ESL writing classrooms have changed dramatically, focusing on writing as a communicative act and emphasizing students' writing processes and communicative intentions. Along with this change has come recognition of the extent to which reading can be, and in academic settings nearly always is, the basis for the writing.

Recent research has also called in to question the traditional narrow view of the function of the reading in the teaching of writing. Goodman (1986) argues for a "whole language" approach to literacy development. In this view, reading and writing develop together, confirming what first and second language researchers (Belanger, 1987) have claimed and what language teachers intuitively know: Reading and writing abilities are inextricably linked.

Often studies reveal that less skilled readers and writers and both appear to attend to the same thing on the page rather than to the meaning potential of that text, to the forms of the letters and words rather than to the overarching connections between them. Inefficient readers read too locally (Cohen, et al., 1979), failing to link incoming text with previous text, because they are unskilled in rapid text processing in L2,depend too heavily on the bottom-up strategies to decode or extract the message assumed to exist in the text.(Stanovich,1990). Poor L2 writers focus excessively on word and sentence level grammatical and print code concerns. All of this is detriment to the meaning. Good readers and writers on the other hand, are able to focus on the broader concerns related to the communication.

The cognitive research in reading and in writing indicate that proficient L2 readers and writers use strategies not hierarchically or linearly, but interactively in reading and recursively in writing ( Carrell, 1983b; Zamel,1983). The unifying characteristic of good readers and good writers seem to be flexibility, the ability to

use and reuse different strategies as the moment calls for them. This implication of research discouraged teachers to focus on subskills of reading and writing, such as grammar and vocabulary, and encouraged to focus on cognitive strategies those L1 proficient readers and writers imitate. Classrooms have turned toward teaching the processes of reading and writing.

### **Approaches to Reading/Writing Relationships :**

Interest and research in reading/writing relationships have both emerged from and been drawn from many areas, including reading theory, cognitive psychology, linguistics, pragmatics, reader response theory, communication studies, literary theory, and rhetoric. This cross-disciplinary research has resulted in distinctly different approaches to investigating the reading-writing relationships, Tierney & Shanahan (1991) suggest three general categories of inquiry that have been pursued by various researchers and theorists:

- 1) Reading and writing as shared knowledge and shared processing;
- 2) Reading and writing as transactions among readers, writers, and texts;
- 3) Reading and writing as collaborative events.

### **Reading and Writing: Shared Knowledge and Shared Process**

Tierney & Shanahan's first category comprises research that suggests that what reading and writing have in common are shared knowledge and shared processes. That is, what we know about reading is similar to what we know about writing, and the way that we comprehend text is similar to the way that we compose text. The shared knowledge/shared process perspective is an absolute view in which reading and writing are seen as separate from their social, communicative, or functional effectiveness and from each other (Shanahan & Tierney, 1990).

Evidence of **shared knowledge** has been summarized in Stotsky's (1983) and Belanger's (1987) extensive reviews of correlational studies of reading and writing performance. Their summaries of research findings yielded the following:

- a) There are correlations between reading achievement and writing ability. Better writers tend to be better readers
- b) There are correlations between writing quality and reading experience as reported through questionnaires. Better writers read more than poorer writers.
- c) There seem to be correlations between reading ability and measures of syntactic complexity in writing. Better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer writers.

Theorists of the **shared process** perspective, acknowledging a conceptual shift to reading as meaning making and to writing as process, have looked at the possibility that parallel cognitive processes underlie reading and writing. Tierney & Pearson (1983), and Wittrock (1983) all claim that common generative cognitive processes are involved in meaning construction in both composing and comprehending text. Kucer (1987) proposes four potential key cognitive mechanisms for reading and writing: (1) both emphasize background knowledge, (2) both draw on a common data pool of written language, (3) both utilize similar transformation processes of background knowledge into text, and (4) both employ common processing patterns in text production as individuals read and write. It is from this common pool of cognitive and linguistic operations, Kucer claims, that readers and writers construct text world productions. These models all provide for acknowledging the shared processes that readers and writers draw on in comprehending and composing text. In other words, they assume that whatever processes a reader uses to make meaning of a text may also be the same processes that a writer uses to create meaning.

### **Transactions between Readers and Writers**

The second perspective that Tierney & Shanahan discuss is one of emanating from reader response theory and communication studies. This view which Sternglass (1986b) refers to as transactive, is concerned how readers think about authors in constructing text meaning and how writers consider readers' needs. The reading and writing relationship is understood as negotiation, and competency is conditional, not absolute, dependent on readers' and writers' goals and intentions, and circumstances (Shanahan & Tierney, 1990). In the transactional model there is no ideal text, only "effective" text in which success equals effective communication relative to participants' goals.

The theoretical groundwork for the transactional perspective in literature research comes from reader response criticism, which examines text structure and processes by which meaning results from writer-text-reader transactions. For Rosenblatt (1978), the meaningful experience of a text is in the transaction between the text and reader. The text itself, she claims, is incomplete; it needs a reader's experience to make it understood. A literary work is what is read, it exists in the mind, not on the page, and meanings vary with different readers. The text itself checks excessive variations, although Fish (1980) says that agreement comes from an interpretive community that reaches consensus on meaning.

### Reading-to-Write/Composing from Sources

It examines the cognitive dimensions of reading and writing. Discussions on reading for writing acknowledge that reading and writing are separate abilities, yet the collaborative nature of composing from sources strengthens the connection between them. "Because reading and writing processes blend and co-occur," Spivey (1990) says,

*it would be inaccurate to portray intentional acts of composing from sources as a linear, two step procedure in which a person reads a source text simply for comprehension in a text driven way before beginning the process of writing. Acts of composing from sources are hybrid acts of literacy in which writing influences reading and reading influences writing (p.259)*

Researchers interested in the collaborative uses of reading/writing relationships have looked at two aspects of reading for writing. First they have examined the *cognitive* processes involved in reading for writing. This research has centered on the specific reading-to-write activities of summarizing and synthesizing texts. Second researchers have examined the *cognitive* effects claimed to reading-to-write. This research focuses on ways in which some combination of reading and writing promotes ongoing thinking and learning.

Evidence that language proficiency plays a role in reading to write for second language learners suggests that the developmental continua of summarizing and synthesizing abilities may interact with and depend on developing language skills, and this suggests a sequence of reading-to-write skills in relation to the language-learning syllabus.

### Reading and Writing compared:

Reading in the writing classroom is understood as the appropriate input for acquisition of writing skills because it is generally assumed that reading passages will somehow function as primary models for learning skills. A variety of studies, which we will look into indicate that reading or pleasure reading contributes to the development of writing ability. It is found that an increase in reading has been generally been found to be more effective in producing gains in writing than increasing writing frequency, where students are taught writing by making them write more and more. Let us have a closer look into three studies that compared the effects of the reading and writing on encouraging development of writing skill. In each group of students who wrote frequently were compared to a group that wrote less and spent more time reading.

In Hey's (1962), high school students who are in their grades nine to twelve were taken as subjects. The subjects were divided in to two groups: the writing group and the reading group: the writing class was given one particular theme a week to write on and was corrected rigorously by the teacher. On the other hand, the reading class was given a theme every third week and they spent one period per week reading in a class. At the end of the year, the works of both groups were evaluated. both the groups showed clear progress, but the reading group outperformed the writing group on the step writing test and received higher ratings on content and organization, mechanics, diction and rhetoric.

To sum up, as we can see from the above study increasing reading has been generally been found to be more effective in producing gains in writing. However, there are some evidences in producing gains in writing (Petrovsky, 1981) especially expository writing, is related to improvement in writing ability. But not all studies report gains in writing ability with increased practice, however and increased practice may not be as effective as increased reading. Hence we shall now look at the interrelationship between reading and writing.

### Integration of both Reading and Writing:

Despite the parallels in between research findings and commonsense views that reading and writing have a reciprocal effect on each other, adult ESL classrooms are only beginning to consider how to effectively integrate both reading and writing. We know that reading builds knowledge of various kinds to use in writing and that writing consolidates knowledge that in a way that builds schemata to read with. (Sternglass, 1988). It is also known fact that for example, biology professors learn to write articles the way the biology professors do by reading articles that biology professors have written. Yet we continue to separate ESL reading from ESL writing courses.

### Interrelationship between Reading and writing:

Writing competence is hypothesized that it "comes only from large amounts of self motivated reading for interests and/or pleasure. It is acquired subconsciously; readers are unaware they are acquiring writing competence while they are reading, and are unaware of this accomplishment after acquisition has taken place. It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look for the texture of reader-based prose". (Krashen, 1984:20)

Below are five fundamental relationships that seem most significant according Wisconsin State Reading Association ([www.wrsa.org](http://www.wrsa.org)).

- 1) Reading and writing are interdependent. Readers would be at a loss if there were no writers to produce texts. Writers would be equally at loss if there were no readers for whom to produce texts.
- 2) Reading and writing are reciprocal processes. Writers can learn much about writing through reading. Likewise, readers can learn much about by reading by writing.

3) Reading and writing are parallel processes. Both are purposeful, are dependent on background knowledge and experiences, and are focused on the construction of meaning.

4) Reading and writing naturally intersect in the process of learning about the world. As writers explore topics, they often find the need to read. As readers explore topics, they often find the need to write.

Krashen (1984, 23) stated that, "when enough reading is done all the necessary grammatical structures and discourse rules for writing will automatically be presented to the writer in sufficient quantity". However, we must remember that if writing competence develops as a result of pleasure reading, then writing practice per se does not develop competence but practice helps performance.

### Conclusion:

There is a necessity to understand a new way of thinking that recognizes that reading and writing are inextricably and reflexively connected, that a written text is a reading text that we read to write and write to be read, and that reading and writing are similar processes of meaning making. It also recognizes that we use reading and writing within a specific context and this context gives a purpose and a form to what we do. To paraphrase Geertz (1983), expert writers become experts by attaining the local knowledge that enables them to write as members of a discourse community. In other words, no one can universally be an expert writer; the notion of expert writer must be grounded in a specific sociocultural context.

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