

## IMPROVING COLLEGE STUDENTS' READING AND WRITING BY COMBINING READING AND WRITING ACTIVITIES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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As a teacher of EFL at UFSC since 1975, I have observed semester after semester the difficulties that students in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature have in reading and especially in writing not only at the beginning but at more advanced stages when they are close to graduating. I have also observed that these students have little interest in reading and writing in a foreign language either inside or outside the classroom. Conversations with my fellow teachers confirmed that they had observed the same weaknesses in their students and that they shared my concerns about this problem.

Students who are preparing to be teachers of a foreign language should have a reasonable command of the four language skills—speaking, understanding, reading, writing—by the time they graduate. For those who wish to continue their training in English by doing graduate work, competence seems even more important as good reading and writing skills are the *sine qua non* for engaging in graduate work.

Thus, I often asked myself and my colleagues how we might improve students' reading and writing skills. Clearly, students cannot be expected to improve their reading and writing skills in a foreign language by chance, i.e., through other language activities such as listening and speaking. As with any other skill, reading and writing can only be learned through much practice. Therefore, reading and writing should be addressed as early as possible in foreign language

courses (Allen and Vallette, 1977; Cates and Swaffar, 1979; and others). In addition, both skills should receive a direct focus through activities that make students aware of the steps in each of the two processes (Soule-Susbielles, 1987).

In recent years, there has been increased awareness that combining reading and writing activities in the language classroom can be a means of enhancing both skills. A large body of research on the reading-writing relationship exists on language teaching to native speakers of English (Stotsky, 1982; Sanacore, 1983; Gold, 1981; Cook and Griffith, 1989; Persish, Meadows, and Sinatra, 1990). Research also suggests that reading and writing share some strategies and, therefore, learning these strategies through one of the two skills should transfer to the other (Petrosky, 1982; Rubin and Hansen, 1984; Trosky and Wood, 1982; and others). By focusing on the commonalities in the reading and writing process, teachers can not only develop these two skills, but stimulate critical thinking skills (Simpson, 1986; Tierney, Sotter, O'Flahavan, and McGinley, 1989). Making students aware of the stages in their reading and writing helps them become actively involved and teaches them to direct their reading comprehension and to manage the process of writing (Santa, Dailey, and Nelson, 1985).

Various techniques to integrate reading and writing in the classroom have been developed for language and content area teachers at elementary, secondary, and college levels (Raphael, Kirscher, and Englert, 1988; Kurt and Farris, 1990). Although the effects of some of these techniques have been investigated through formal research, many techniques for integrating reading and writing activities have been used only as teaching devices and the results observed informally.

Trosky and Wood (1982), for example, developed a writing model to teach reading at secondary and college levels based on the following rationale:

If the writing process is better understood through systematic practice in building relationships, the ability to uncover relationships in someone else's writing will increase (p. 35).

To these authors, the steps in reading and writing are analogous, and the activities they propose for using writing to teach reading reflects this belief by focusing on process and relationships in writing. Trosky and Wood observed that this model may help students become aware that "reading and writing are complementary features in classroom

work" (p. 40). This model also helps students realize that they do not have to be a literary writer to produce writing that is worth reading, thereby helping them develop confidence in themselves as writers.

Sinatra, Gemake, and Morgan (1986) also combined reading and writing activities in the classroom by using the technique of "semantic mapping" to improve college students' reading and writing. After reading, students construct a semantic map of the text which graphically arranges ideas to show how the main and secondary ideas are related in that text. Like Trosky and Wood's model of writing, this technique helps students identify the idea relationships in reading selections and in their own compositions, which were often based on readings. Sinatra and his colleagues found that this technique improved their students' reading as well as their writing, and they strongly recommend it to teachers of college freshman.

McGinley and Denner (1987) proposed using "story impressions" as a technique for integrating reading and writing. "Story impressions" is a prereading writing activity that focuses on the composing process as an important link between writing and reading. The activity helps students realize that reading, like writing, is an active composing process and also helps them activate their previous knowledge and see how they can use this knowledge to understand text. The activity has the following steps: (1) Students are given key words from the assigned reading selection to help them make predictions about the text. After reading all the cues once, they then brainstorm to connect them logically. (2) Students next compose a short story which the teacher writes on the board as they compose it. (3) Students then read the assigned story silently, or the teacher reads it to them. (4) Teacher and students discuss the ways in which the class's story is similar to or different from the author's. The closeness of match between the two stories is not important. Rather, it is important that students write a logical story based on the clues given and that, during their reading, they think about how their story agreed or disagreed with the author's story. (5) Finally, the students are given clues from a different story and asked to write their own prediction story, or as a means of promoting cooperative learning, they may also be asked to complete the activity in small groups.

The authors inferred from their informal observations that students who compose their own prediction story before reading may pay attention to more than just the plot when reading the actual story. They also observed that students referred directly to issues related to the author's craft in many of their comments during the post-reading discussion.

Brozo (1988) describes an adaptation of the "reader response heuristic," originally presented as a means of responding to literature or assisting senior high history students in constructing meaningful interpretations of expository texts. After reading a text, students wrote a response to what they read, allowing them to explore their personal connections with the content of the text through writing. Brozo concludes:

Giving readers a purpose for creating written responses to expository text that is personally meaningful is, I think, the most compelling way to integrate reading and writing in content classrooms (p. 145).

Oberlin and Sugarman (1988) describe in detail a sequence of activities that combine reading and writing. They propose three writing activities to use with narrative and expository texts in grades 5 through 9 which relate prewriting and prereading, preview unfamiliar text, and connect students' prior knowledge to text information. They are intended to provide students with purposeful writing before reading and to enhance their comprehension by making reading more meaningful.

More recently, research on the reading-writing relationship has emphasized its power to foster learning and critical thinking skills.

Kurt and Farris (1990), for example, describe various reading and writing activities that teachers can include in their lessons to help students develop problem-solving strategies and critical thinking skills. Instead of organizing classes around textbook lessons, these authors recommend that teachers restructure lessons and sequence activities to incorporate the higher order thinking skills, and they give clear examples of reading, thinking, and writing activities that can be used to achieve this goal. By determining the instructional framework through restructuring and sequencing textbook material, the teacher enables students to develop learning strategies as well as to understand more about their own learning.

Tierney *et al.* (1989) directly investigated the effects of writing in combination with reading on college students' thinking. The subjects for this study were 137 American undergraduates from two large universities in the midwestern United States. Each subject was randomly assigned to one of 12 conditions and one of the two selected topics. The three conditions that were combined to form the various treatments were as follows:

1. **Introductory activity:** After a brief introduction, each subject was assigned to one of three treatments: (a) writing a letter to the editor on the assigned topic, (b) completing a knowledge activation activity on the assigned topic, or (c) no activity.
2. **Reading condition.** Students either read or did not read an editorial on the assigned topic.
3. **Question condition.** Students either answered or did not answer selected open-ended and multiple-choice questions on issues raised by the topic (p. 138).

After analyzing the subjects' letters and revisions, responses to questions, and debriefing comments, the researchers found that there were significant differences between students who both wrote and read and students in any of the other treatment groups and concluded that:

If thinking critically entails a greater willingness to revise one's position on an issue, then the data from the debriefing comments suggest that reading and writing in combination are more likely to critical thinking than when reading is separated from writing or when reading is combined with knowledge activation or answering questions" (p. 134).

Journal writing has been one of the most popular techniques for combining reading and writing among teachers of reading and composition. Although there is little research on the effects of journal writing in developing students' reading and writing skills, the technique has been widely used as a classroom technique and strongly recommended to teachers as an effective device to develop reading and writing, as well as thinking skills (Kelly, 1981; Fulweiler, 1978, Frager and Malena, 1986; Kurt and Farris, 1990). Since journals were introduced, several versions have been devised to suit different teachers and different students' needs. In the dialogue journal, for example, teachers not only read students' journals, but write responses to students' journal entries, thereby engaging in a dialogue with students.

According to Staton and Kreeft-Peyton (1987), the use of dialogue journals began as a classroom practice, not as a research idea or theory-derived technique. Leslie Reed, a Los Angeles elementary

school teacher, had used this technique with 6th grade students as early as 1964. The data Reed collected from her students' journals became the focus of Jana Staton's dissertation in 1979, and the idea of dialogue journal writing spread quickly among language teachers and researchers.

Hoffman (1983) used journal writing with American college students as a means of developing college students' reflective thinking. Students wrote four journal entries each week over an entire semester. Although the focus of their journal entries was on school work, students could also include thoughts and feelings about people, their everyday life, etc... Three times during the semester they were asked to condense their journals into a summary, i.e., into a reflective essay on what they had observed about themselves as learners. The journal writing activities helped students gain a perspective on themselves as the central actors in the process of learning and studying and led them to take responsibility for their own behavior and attitudes as students, with regard to their work at college. Hoffman concluded that journal writing helped students become more conscious and independent learners by emphasizing "the student's responsibility in the learning process, and at the same time offering a way to develop the insight needed for improvement (p. 347)."

Browning (1986) combined reading and writing through journal writing to help American college freshman become better readers. Three times a week during their reading classes, students were asked to read for 15 minutes and then to write in their journal for 10 minutes after they completed the assigned readings. In their journal entry, they were first to comment on their views about the reading, in other words, to react to what they had read. Second, they were to comment on what they did as readers. (For example, what made them stop? Had they read quickly or slowly?, etc.) If they had trouble with a particular section, they were to write the entire sentence and then to underline the problem portion. Students were also asked to write a detailed analysis of their classes (at least two sides of a page) for some of their journal writings, and sometimes they were allowed to write about anything of interest. During the reading the teacher also read, and she also wrote during the journal writing. The teacher collected the journals every two weeks and responded to them in writing.

Based on informal observations, Browning concluded that journal writing made a difference to these students by developing their reading comprehension and thinking skills. In their journals, students stated that they read a wider variety of materials and that they enjoyed reading more than before. They also felt that their comprehension and

writing were improving and that they were more aware of the reading process. Finally, they enjoyed the opportunity to express their feelings and ideas, and appreciated the student-teacher communication.

Ruppert and Bruggeman (1986) also used dialogue journal writing with American college students. To capitalize on the social potential of reading, they incorporated a journal requirement into their college reading program. Their strategy was to have students respond to individually selected articles, and then to use these responses as a basis for small group discussions of ideas and opinions. Each student chose a magazine article or another piece of writing and then summarized and responded to it in writing. Students had to express a personal opinion about the article and describe their feelings about the content of the reading. Then, they shared their response to the article with a small group of peers, who, in turn, reacted to their oral and written expression. The authors observed that this technique deeply involved students in the learning task and concluded that combining opportunities for self-selected reading, written personal responses, and social sharing of ideas help students recognize and strengthen the connection between reading and life.

Dialogue journal writing has also been used in ESL classes in various countries around the world (Staton, Kreeft-Peyton, and Gutstein, 1986; 1988; Adkins, 1988; Spack and Sadow, 1983). Spack and Sadow (1983) used dialogue journals with students of ESL freshman composition courses as a regular activity and as an integral part of their classes. Spack and Sadow's objective was to change the emphasis in writing from the written product to the writing process. Students were not asked to fit a topic into a rhetorical form according to some model previously studied, but were given the opportunity to do more expressive and reflexive writing. The topics for the journals were drawn from the students' academic writing class. All students and the teacher wrote about the same topic and worked together in a process of solving problems and answering questions. The authors found that the journal writing activity helped students better understand the purpose of writing, i.e., to explore, develop, focus, organize, and to share their ideas with others.

More recently there have been a few other research studies on the use of journal writing with non-native speakers. Dolly (1990) describes her experience of using dialogue journals with ESL college students. She found that dialogue journals help students gain confidence in writing in a foreign language and that they promote a relaxed atmosphere which allows good interaction between teacher and students. Sole (1990) also discusses the importance of using

dialogue journals with ESL college students and gives examples of her activities.

As can be seen in this review of the relevant literature, most research on the reading-writing connection were conducted with native speakers of English, and only a few studies on non-native speakers exist. Although the results of research studies on the reading-writing relationship have not been entirely consistent, some findings as well as teachers' experience in the classroom indicate that combining reading and writing activities may be a promising pedagogical strategy to help students become better readers and writers both in the native and in the second or foreign language. As a result, I decided to study the effects of using dialogue journals, which combine reading and writing activities, on the reading and writing skills of Brazilian college students of EFL. After surveying the techniques available, dialogue journals seemed to be one of the most feasible to use with students who had an intermediate proficiency in a foreign language. I adapted a version of the dialogue journal used by Ruppert and Bruggeman (1986) for use in my EFL classroom.

The study was conducted in a natural environment, i.e., in the actual classroom during students' regular English classes, and involved nine Brazilian students in the College of Letters at Universidade de Florianópolis, Santa Catarina (UFSC), who were English majors. It took place in 1990 during these students' fifth and sixth semesters.

Students had four fifty-minute classes of English a week where they were taught reading and academic writing following their textbooks. In addition to their regular reading and writing activities, every two weeks students were given a text to read at home and asked to write a brief summary and their reaction to the content. During the first weeks, all students read the same text, but as they became more familiar with the activity, each student chose a text from a variety of texts I had selected based on the students' interests.

At the beginning of each class, one or two students gave a brief report about the reading to their classmates, who listened and took notes. During the 10-15 minute presentation the student could refer to his summary if he or she needed to. Afterwards, the other students were encouraged to ask questions, make comments, and ask for clarification of points they had not understood very well during the oral presentation. The question period provided ample opportunity for student discussion. My own participation in these discussions was minimal, and I intervened only when there was a breakdown in communication.



Besides these bi-weekly activities, students wrote a journal at home. To help students get started, I suggested that they chose a topic or idea from their readings to discuss. However, students were free to write about any topic of interest: their struggles with school work, successes and frustrations in school, their everyday life at home, at the job, leisure, etc... About twice a month I collected students' journals and responded to them in writing, but made no formal corrections and gave no grades as I read journals for the ideas, not for the form.

In my journal responses to the students, I encouraged them to continue writing. After praising them for improvement, I might commend interesting/intriguing ideas presented in their journals, ask them to rethink and reformulate certain ideas they had expressed, disagree with them on certain points, or ask them to clarify unclear points. Students were free to answer or ignore my questions. The main purpose of my questioning was to make them reflect on what they had written.

I evaluated the effectiveness of the dialogue journal by examining students' written journals, observing students' attitudes and behavior toward the reading and writing activities, and interviewing students formally and informally. As I had hoped, students' experience with dialogue journal writing produced considerable changes in their behavior and attitudes towards reading and writing in the foreign language and towards learning in general. I observed that students' motivation towards reading and writing strongly increased over the two semesters of the project in that they were more willing to undertake the regular reading and writing tasks required in their English classes. Their increased motivation was also reflected in their attendance. Students hardly ever missed a class or arrived late. Class attendance was almost 100% during both semesters of the project even though the class started at 7:30 in the morning.

During the second semester that they used dialogue journals, I observed a clearly visible improvement in most students' writing and reading as well as in their listening and speaking. Not only were students writing more, but the writing was better organized and more coherent. Their writing was richer in ideas, and the ideas were better developed than in their initial writings. Students also increased their reading rate and comprehension and, therefore, were gradually able to read longer and more complex texts. As a consequence of reading more, students increased their vocabulary, which in turn led to more reading as various students asked me to recommend additional readings. Although I was most concerned about the effect of dialogue

journals on students' reading and writing development, I also observed that two students who remained rather quiet in class during the first semester were able to express their ideas very clearly during their presentations in the second semester. Students themselves seemed to be aware of these improvements and referred to them in their journals as the examples below illustrate:

— During these two semesters we have been writing journals, I really feel my writing in English has improved.

— I feel that I am motivated and able to write and writing better. I'm sure that the texts that each classmate is supposed to read and to talk about in class not only help us with vocabulary, speaking and comprehension but also stimulates to write our experiences.

— I guess I'm growing up with this system of reading and writing.

I also observed that students developed more confidence in themselves. They realized that they had important things to say and that they were able to express themselves in the written as well as in the spoken form, even though their English was not perfect yet. In one journal entry, a student wrote:

— I have already told you in one of my journals that in the beginning I had some difficulties, but now I should say that writing in English is a pleasant activity for me.

— One of the most positive aspects of your project is that we are free to write about what we want, we don't need to care about the subject or about the kind of composition (...) this kind of activity has made me do it without concerning about grades and it comes relaxing to me.

Another extremely positive result was a growing critical attitude toward texts which could be observed when students read and discussed their readings. They would question ideas from their reading and even disagree with the author on certain issues. They also changed their attitude toward their own writing. In the beginning, students were very reluctant to revise their writings. By the end of the project however, rethinking and reformulating ideas in their academic writing had become almost second nature to them. They perceived that reading many texts on a variety of different subjects was enriching their thinking. One student wrote:

— Reading to write gives us knowledge and, at the same time, it brings our experiences, our background about that subject.

— Actually, to read is important not only because it permits us to know, to understand the world, but also because through this activity we become able to produce our own opinions, judgments, that is, through reading we develop our sense of understanding about the reality.

It seems that students had gradually overcome the tendency to accept everything that was written on paper as correct, true and final.

At the end of this preliminary study, I concluded that individualized reading combined with dialogue journal writing is an effective strategy to motivate students and increase their interest in reading and writing in a foreign language. Students' reading and writing ability improved greatly by the end of two semesters. Their reaction toward journal writing was very positive, and they recommended that teachers use journals in all foreign language classes from the first semester to the last.

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