

Improving EFL Learners' Writing through Enhanced Extensive Reading

Abstract

The present paper aims at presenting a theoretical background about the relationship between extensive reading and writing. First, basic definitions of writing and extensive writing in different research studies are investigated moving forward to make a connection between the two aspects of language learning. Second, it delves into the relationship between extensive reading and writing on one hand and reading and writing on the other. Finally, the paper puts forward some implications for practitioners in the field. In fact, by providing various definitions of reading, extensive reading and writing and the role they play in the process of language learning, this research provides a clear-cut overview of the tight relationship between extensive reading and writing as well as its application in the EFL classroom.

Therefore, a review of studies on the relationship between extensive reading and writing is provided to account for the possible effectiveness of benefiting from extensive reading materials in the language learning process in that the learning context (students' writing) can be positively affected if teachers resort to extensive reading materials. This demands that all the stakeholders should be aware of issues surrounding the improvement of students' writings through extensive reading materials. If these reading materials are consciously selected by teachers, students can certainly have better performance in writing.

Introduction

"The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign

language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it.”
(Nuttall:168).

Language teachers throughout the world are continually looking for methods of improving their students' language proficiency namely in the five skills: Listening, speaking, reading, writing and culture. These skills are inextricably inter-related to the extent to which we may argue that there is a causal relationship between one another. i.e. one leads to the mastery of the other. As far as reading and writing are concerned, it is argued that one of the main objectives of writing instruction is to enable students to write well. Yet, we know from published articles and from writing scholars, that EFL students do not write as well as we think they should (e.g., Hillocks, 1986; Ping, 2000; Rijaarsdam et al.,2005 among others). The reasons for students' inability to write well enough to meet teachers' expectations are many and varied. Some teachers blame the students for being lazy, while most students blame it on the writing skill itself for being extremely complex. However, It is argued that if students are exposed to extensive reading materials such as graded readers and authentic materials, their proficiency in writing skill will indubitably improve.

1. What is Writing ?

In terms of pedagogy, writing is a cornerstone in the language teaching setting as students are required to write down notes and to take written exams. Yet, over the years it has seemed that writing has been seen as only a support system for learning grammar and vocabulary rather than a skill in its own right. However, theorists have looked again at writing in the foreign language classroom and acknowledged the importance of writing as a vital skill for speakers of a foreign language as much as for everyone using their first language (Harmer, 2004).Writing is one of the three modes of linguistic expression and communication along with speaking and signing. Writing is not a representation of speech, as it was once thought; rather, speaking, writing and signing are all manifestations of language users' knowledge, perspective and communicative competence (Canale & Swain,1980 ; Bachman , 1990 as cited in Chmitt (ed.), 2010). Writing, unlike speech, is not learned naturally by everyone but through

explicit instruction (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996); as Leki (1992: 10) put it, “ no one is a “*native speaker*” of writing”. Furthermore, writing is generally a group of letters or symbols written or marked on a surface as a means of communication (Collins, 2003). This definition suggests that writing is the activity of producing a piece of written language which is designed to be read. However, writing is more than being a matter of transcribing language into symbols. Just as speech is more than producing sounds, writing is much more than the production of graphic symbols; these symbols have to be arranged according to some conventions to form words, and to combine them to form sentences. A sequence of sentences, short or long, but coherent is an adequate means of communication(Collins, *ibid*).

2. What is Extensive Reading?

“We learn to read by reading” (Nuttall:168).

ER is a reading approach related to quantity and content of reading and the way of understanding what has been read. Concerning quantity, despite the variation as to what it means to be extensive in reading, Masuhara, et.al (as cited in Hickey & Williams, 1996,p.264) concluded that

“ER involves reading large quantities of material, authentic or graded, for pleasure in an individualized manner with students having full control over the selection and fulfilment of the reading and the pace of reading with a certain amount of control by the teacher”.

In terms of content, ER materials need to be interesting, not too difficult, rich and varied (Yu, 2002). Krashen (1993 a, p. 10) on the other hand used the term free voluntary reading (FVR), by which he meant *“reading because you want to read and putting down a book you do not like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time.* Another comprehensive definition of ER was provided by Davis (1995,p.329 in Richards & Renandya, 2002,p.296). Based on an English language teaching (ELT) classroom implementation, they described ER as follows:

“An extensive reading program is a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which students are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressure of testing or marks. Thus, students are competing only against themselves, and it is up to the teacher to provide the motivation and monitoring to ensure that the maximum number of books is being read in the time available., The books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance to the students’ lives, rather than for literary merit”

3. Extensive Reading vs. Intensive Reading.

Extensive reading as a term naming an approach to teaching a foreign language reading was introduced by Harold Palmer and Michael West after piloting a project of ER in India. The term was chosen to distinguish extensive reading from intensive reading. Intensive reading refers to “*careful reading (or translation) of shorter, more difficult foreign language texts with the goal of complete and detailed understanding*” (Bamford and Welsh, 2007). In other words, intensive reading involves learners reading in detail with specific learning aims and tasks. On the other hand, Extensive Reading is based on reading easy material that contains mostly unknown words, this kind of reading is done for the sake of pleasure. Students choose their own materials and can stop reading if the material is not interesting for them. There are no tests after reading; student’s personal reaction to reading is the goal. ER imitates reading in the first language in the way that its key elements are purpose and pleasure (Bamford and Welsh, *ibid*). Bamford (*ibid*) states that Intensive reading can be associated with teaching of reading in terms of its component skills i.e. distinguishing the main idea of a text, reading for gist etc. Extensive reading, in contrast, is generally “*associated with reading large amounts of text with the aim of getting the overall meaning of the text rather than the meaning of individual words or sentences.*” (Bamford and Welch, *ibid*)

4. Reading and Writing Relationships

Many researchers believe that extensive reading results in writing competence. This belief was extended by Krashen (1982) to L2 in his “reading input hypothesis,” which is directly related to his “comprehensive input” hypothesis. Krashen’s “reading input hypothesis” postulates that extensive, self-directed pleasure reading in the target language influences writing proficiency and improve writing style. This hypothesis implies as discussed before that good readers have an important skill that can help them become good writers. However, this hypothesis is hardly applicable to EFL learners, mainly because their chances to read extensively are minimized due to the nature of the syllabi which are overloaded with content, hence, students hardly find time to read for pleasure, also, teachers are pressurized by time to finish the syllabus on due time which makes it difficult for them to assign any extra reading materials. Concerning the comparison between L1 and L2 literacy skill, it is argued that ESL/EFL learners are not exposed to L2 literacy as early and extensively as their L1 counterparts. Moreover, ESL/EFL students

approach L2 literacy with fully developed literacy in L1 (Eisterhold, 1990). Finally, programs that offer extensive reading for ESL students are very few, and such courses are typically unavailable to EFL students. Peer review is one of the commonly used techniques in a composition class that reflects the whole language view of reading and writing as interrelated activities. Peer review can be seen “as a powerful learning tool incorporating reading and writing practice” (Gousseva, 1998, p.2). Gillam (1990) argues that peer review activities benefit both the respondent and the writer; reading peers’ papers and responding to them offers the students a valuable opportunity to develop critical reading skills, and exercise “different order reading skills” (p.98) than those used by the students when reading professionally written texts, which the students assume to be flawless. Gillam (ibid) maintains that a further advantage of peer review is in the opportunity to develop meta-language useful for thinking and talking about writing.

Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000, pp. 40-42) elaborated four types of shared knowledge that readers and writers use: “*meta- knowledge*” (knowing about the functions and goals of reading and writing), “*domain knowledge*” (world knowledge and prior knowledge about substance and content), “*knowledge about universal attributes*” (knowing about letter recognition and grammar or rules for sentence construction), and “*procedural knowledge and skill to negotiate reading and writing*” (predicting, questioning, recalling, and trying to find analogies). Several second language (L2) studies—a relatively small number compared to first language (L1) research—have reported a close connection between reading and writing in a second or foreign language. Carrell and Connor (1991) examined reading and writing relationships in English as a second language with 33 international undergraduate and graduate students. The study considered the effects of genre (descriptive and persuasive), educational level (undergraduate and graduate), measure (multiple-choice, recall reading, holistic, and qualitative writing), and second language proficiency. The study found that although all the different measures failed to yield consistent results, there was a significant correlation between reading and writing in a second language. Flahive and Bailey (1993) explored the reading and writing relationship in adult second language learners and found a significant correlation between the reading comprehension test scores and holistic scores of an argumentative essay. With respect to the relationship between reading experience and writing ability, Janopoulos (1986) studied the relationship between pleasure reading and writing proficiency in the college students and found that “heavy” L2 readers were proficient writers (p. 766). Esmaeili (2002) found that English as a second language (ESL) college students performed better at both reading and writing tasks when both tasks were thematically related. The thematic connection affected students’ reading and writing.

Despite the similarities and correlations between reading and writing skills, these two skills are, in many aspects, different and thus should be taught together. As Shanahan (1988) remarked, “reading and writing do not overlap sufficiently to permit complete reading and writing development through an

instructional emphasis on one or the other” (p. 637). Language curriculum should be structured to explicitly draw out the underlying skills and processes to enhance students’ ability to achieve both. In Ferris and Snyder (1986), native English speaking students in sixth grade who received writing instruction did not significantly improve their reading comprehension and reading vocabulary while improving their writing. Hedgcock and Atkinson (1993) found significant relationships between writing proficiency and various reading habits for native English speaking students; the relationship was found to a lesser degree for ESL students. That is, extensive reading in L1 or L2 had little impact on ESL students’ writing proficiency. This result sheds light on the complex nature of L2 learning and the transferability of L1 and L2 research. It suggests the need to consider L2 learners’ needs, experiences, and their learning contexts.

5. Reading and writing Instruction

Although research has identified the close relationship between reading skill and writing skill, it is still not often clear, from the instructional perspective, how both skills can be enhanced together. Previous research has considered the influence of learning one skill on learning the other (e.g., whether reading instruction influences writing ability) or the influence of L1 ability on L2 learning (e.g., whether reading and writing abilities in L1 affect those in L2). That is, many researchers have examined if teaching one skill could benefit students’ learning another skill and if students’ language proficiency in one language could contribute to their learning of reading and writing in another language. According to Krashen’s (1993) reading input hypothesis, large amounts of reading should lead to gains in writing ability. Nevertheless, rather than putting more weight on one or the other skill (e.g., extensive reading or creative use of language), some researchers emphasize both skills and value their interaction. Shanahan and Lomax (1986) examined three theoretical models: the interactive model (reading influences writing and writing influences reading), the reading-to-writing model (reading knowledge influences writing but not the other way around), and the writing-to-reading model (writing influences reading but reading does not influence writing). They drew a conclusion that the interactive model explained the data better than the reading-to-writing model and the writing-to-reading model. Based on the extensive analysis of research on reading and writing, Grabe (2001) emphasized that reading and writing should be taught together. Similarly, Shanahan’s (1988) emphasis on the instruction of the two skills was to teach both reading and writing to help students develop a clear understanding of literacy. Although both L1 and L2 studies have presented a convincing argument for the development of literacy skills in the context of integrated reading and writing connections (e.g., Hirvela, 2004; Shanahan, 1997), the literature clearly lacks empirical studies that examine actual foreign language classrooms and materials as well as student performance and teacher practices regarding the integrated reading and writing instruction.

However, to teach L2 reading and writing together, a promising instructional strategy can be teaching students how to summarize. Summarizing is an important academic writing skill as it is frequently used as a means of comprehension, such as learning strategy and testing methodology (Havola, 1987). Grabe (2001, 2003) pointed out that reading and writing relations suggest that summary writing is a major skill for the literacy development. Nevertheless, research on summary writing in relation to reading and writing relationships (e.g., reading to write, writing to learn, and writing from multiple source texts) has not received sufficient attention. Summarizing involves a number of skills such as discriminating main ideas from details, eliminating less important details, condensing, rewording, and reorganizing the original text. Managing these skills in L2 is more challenging for EFL students not only because EFL summarizers need lexical and syntactic knowledge of L2 to comprehend the given text so as to write a summary but also because in their academic contexts they have few chances to summarize written texts in L2. Keck (2006) analyzed 79 native English speaking (L1) and 74 non-native English-speaking (L2) writers' use of paraphrasing within a summary task and developed a taxonomy of paraphrase types: Near copy, Minimal revision, Moderate revision, and Substantial revision. Keck found that most near copies were composed by L2 writers, while most moderate and substantial revisions were composed by L1 writers. Keck's study and other similar studies (e.g., Pecorari, 2003; Shi, 2004) suggested that non-native English-speaking students have a lack of awareness or language proficiency for acceptable paraphrasing. Likewise, EFL writers' language proficiency can affect their summary writing. Baba (2009) investigated the impact of the lexical proficiency of 68 Japanese EFL students on their summary writing in English; the study found that what contributed to the construct of summary writing were the ability to write definitions, which requires semantic knowledge, and the ability to productively use words, as well as the L2 writer's metalinguistic knowledge. The findings suggest that students need to improve lexical, semantic, syntactic knowledge, as well as to raise the self-awareness for the plagiarism. Accordingly, teachers should address paraphrasing in terms of skills and knowledge when teaching summarization.

Implications

Pedagogically, it would be beneficial for practitioners to adopt and employ a variety of inventive writing activities such as creating group stories and sharing personal narratives (Laliberity in Reyes & Halcon, 2001,p.143) to make students love writing. For example, in the first method of group story, the teacher is supposed to be the editor to help students (the writers) select the who (characters), where (setting), and what (plot) of a group story. The teacher then gets students to brainstorm some ideas for the whole class. A voting for three ideas is selected. The same procedure continues with the setting and the plot. Through this strategy, collaborative learning is fostered, teacher's scaffolding as an editor is capitalized. Thus, literacy could be manipulated as an activity that is grounded in promoting critical

reflection on relevant cultural identity. Equally important, when ER is used as a stand-alone part of the teaching program, the researcher suggests verifying the follow up writing activities, especially with adult learners. However, with young learners it is preferable to conduct ER programs without output to nurture and consolidate the habit of reading, away of any other demands. In this respect, teachers should invest some extra time to follow and assess their students' achievements in reading and writing. The task of choosing reading materials is not that easy, hence, The best reading material is material that is easy. Therefore for lower-intermediate students graded readers, magazines written for language learners and children's literature are advisable. Teachers need to be careful when choosing children's literature, some of the titles may contain fairly difficult authentic vocabulary. For high-intermediate learners young adult literature can offer a bridge to ungraded reading materials. Advanced learners will be able to read books especially classical literary canon, magazines and newspapers written for native speakers of English. Some useful and interesting ER follow up activities are displayed with full description for each in (Bamford & Day, 2004, 139-148). These activities include: Quick Book Reports, The Story and Me, Reading Journals, Critic's Corner, The Best of Books and the Worst of Books, and Getting Personal. Such activities beside fostering students' identities, they give students a chance to internalize what they read to produce it later in writing, and to interact with the text, peers, and teacher.

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