
Integrating Reading and Writing in an Elementary Course

Aimee Meditz, Ohio University

Integrating language skills meaningfully and productively is a common challenge in pre-college intensive ESL programs. While a balance in listening and speaking skills in a single course may occur effortlessly, a reading/composition course may be much more difficult to balance. Furthermore, the mere balancing of skills is not enough. Tierney, Leys, Birnbaum, and Dougherty are among the many who have explored the fact that integrating reading and writing is not only valuable but essential (Petersen 1986). Too often, writing is added as a parallel activity related only in topic to a reading passage. A more effective method, however, would be to integrate writing with the skill of reading in a way that maximally exploits reading strategies to develop writing skills and vice versa. This paper will discuss how reading and writing can be integrated in an elementary ESL course in a university intensive English program.

Background

The processes and activities discussed here were designed and used in an elementary reading/composition course in a ten-week intermediate ESL program. They were intended to provide meaningful writing instruction and practice to nine adult foreign students (1 Japanese, 1 Chinese, 2 Taiwanese, and 5 Korean), all of whom possessed minimal skills in reading and writing in English. They were placed at the elementary level on the basis of placement testing which included a composition test. The average score of

their compositions was equivalent to the 1-2 range on the Test of Written English (Educational Testing Service 1990). According to the TWE scoring guidelines, this range is characterized by a weakness or inability to organize and develop a coherent response to a question and to exercise correct usage (Jacobs et al. 1981).

The prime objective of the reading/comprehension course was to develop effective reading skills and strategies and introduce basic paragraph structure and development. The core textbooks established in the curriculum, *Academic Challenges in Reading* (Abdulaziz and Stover 1989) and *The Ability to Risk: Reading Skills for Beginning Students of ESL* (Noone 1986), focused almost exclusively on reading. As there was no writing textbook, integration of writing instruction and practice was left to the discretion of the teacher.

Rationale

Written English is characterized by certain forms and patterns, and successful readers are attuned to those conventions. In teaching reading to L2 learners, teachers must cultivate students' awareness of signals and patterns which help infer meaning and relationships among ideas, and anticipate forthcoming ideas (Dubin and Bycina 1991). A student trained in these strategies, then, will be attuned to the written conventions of English. Such knowledge is necessary for the L2 learner to write more readable discourse. Flower

and Hayes (1980) agree that good writers have a functional knowledge of reader-based prose which allows a wider variety of options in expressing ideas. Also, Eschholz (1980) believes that examining what readers use when they read and exploiting these elements in helping the readers of one's own text are as important as studying the habits of good writers.

Signals and Patterns in Reading

Early in an elementary reading/writing course, students begin to practice using lexical and punctuation signals to determine meaning or, when that is too challenging, the relationship among ideas in a text. For example, lexical signals such as "for example" and "such as" are targeted as cues of example. The colon is introduced as a signal of list, and nouns set off by commas are signals of alternative names, or appositives.

Students also practice citing specific sentences in the text that prove their answers to comprehension questions. When students answer correctly but cannot cite a specific sentence of proof, they discuss how they are able to answer the question. Thus, the notion of inference is introduced. This leads to identifying idea relationships in a paragraph and, later, to how sentences fit together, each having a function committed to a single purpose. This prompts analyzing paragraph patterns: looking at each sentence of a paragraph and asking, "What is this sentence doing for me?" A single word answer such as "example," "explanation," "definition," or "reason" can be used in listing the sentence functions. The resulting paragraph pattern, then, is a numbered list of functions.

Developing Writing Skills

Once students are practiced in exploiting signals and paragraph patterns in reading and understand that readers of their writing will seek out such supports, the process of incorporating these strategies in the writing process may begin.

A first step is to have each student identify the pattern of a paragraph that he has understood. After the student has numbered the sentences, he asks what each sentence is offering the reader and which signals are helpful in identifying the sentence's function. It is not unusual for a sentence to have two parts or functions. In that case, a two-part label may be given.

Having completed the pattern analysis, the student writes a paragraph following the pattern he has identified. When the teacher reads the paragraph, he should write the pattern he finds in the paragraph. In this way, the student writer receives feedback about what the reader gathered in meaning and can compare it to his (the writer's) intended meaning. This imposition of pattern is not intended to be a prescriptive endeavor, but rather a controlled writing assignment that allows the student to experience the constraints of purpose at the sentence level.

This type of constraint is brought to a more realistic level when the student is asked to address an essay question comparable to those found on university examinations. This activity requires the student to read the question, and identify the essential information needed to answer it. The student lists this in terms of the purpose labels he has been using in paragraph pattern analysis. He, then, tries to design a paragraph pattern with those

essential points and any other explanations or examples he finds necessary, or by now typical, in answering a question.

Feedback for this activity comes in two phases. After the paragraph is written, it would be helpful for the class to see sample paragraphs answering the same question. These can be written by the teacher for class discussion. Discussion should compare the pattern analysis with the information required by the question. Secondly, when a student's paper is returned, the teacher's feedback is in the form of a pattern analysis. In this way, the teacher is providing a visual representation of what he understood to be the ideas and their relationships in the paragraph. Referring back to the essay question, the teacher can easily determine if an essential point is missing. In conferencing with the student, he will be able to show which idea is missing (as far as he understands) and elicit student recognition of where the idea could be included in the paragraph.

There are several advantages to this sort of feedback. It gives students the chance to explain their intended meaning and find out what signal or lack of signal misled the reader. All of the feedback is explicit in showing what students should change in their next draft. An added benefit of this feedback is that while the students learn to revise, they realize that the problem is in expressing the idea, not the idea itself. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. makes this valuable point when he writes, "the logic of writing is not the same as the logic of thought, and the clarity of a piece of writing is not the same as the clarity of its thought" (Hirsch 1977, 88-89).

Additional activities should continue to develop student abilities in anticipating sentence functions in context. In one such

activity, students must put sentences of a scrambled paragraph in order. This exercise requires students to apply their understanding of the ideas, the relationship among them, and their sensitivity to signals.

Another related activity would be a sentence-level cloze exercise. Given a paragraph with a few sentences removed, students must determine the type of information that would most likely fill the gap. Early on, these paragraphs should be transparent and heavily signalled so as to be supportive. Later, more challenging ones can serve as the basis for discussion of writer options in developing an idea.

Use in the Writing Process

Applying the signal + pattern method to writing has benefits at each step of the writing process. As a prewriting tool, this method can help generate ideas which are functionally relevant to the topic. For example, given the task of defining "insurance" in a paragraph, students generate the pattern: definition, explanation, example. This is a bit different from a topical outline in that the purpose, not just the topic, of the sentence becomes an explicit objective, helping the writer make conscious choices in weaving the semantic links and relationships from sentence to sentence. Actually, the risk of a student digressing from the paragraph topic is decreased in this method as sentences are generated on the basis of their functional relationship to the topic. If a digression does occur, it can be easily identified and corrected through pattern analysis.

While writing the first draft, students can rely on the pattern if they find it helpful. Others may not work comfortably with the listed pattern. These students can, however, benefit from some self-

questioning during the writing process. When composing a sentence, they may ask what the function of the sentence is or if it contributes strongly to the purpose of the paragraph.

In the editing phase of the writing process, students can write their own patterns, questioning the function of sentences and checking for adequate and coherent signals. After a great deal of experience in having the teacher analyze their paragraphs, students gain a notion of how the system works in expressing both what a reader gets from a paragraph and what a writer intends in the paragraph.

This ability can then be exercised in peer reviewing of the paragraphs. The signal and pattern analysis becomes a tool that students can objectively and constructively use to negotiate meaning through written text. It provides a visual representation of sentence function and semantic relationships. The key objective is to give the student writers something concrete to work on in their next draft, to eliminate the mystery of "Why didn't the teacher/reader understand this?"

Something the signal + pattern method does not do, however, is address surface level errors of spelling and punctuation. Students at the beginning level greatly need instruction in such areas; however, their own writing need not be the context for this until later drafts. It is much more important to teach the student how to develop a coherent and cohesive paragraph than it is to correct the surface errors of a paragraph that weakly expresses ideas.

Interestingly, however, one elementary student in the reading/composition course did find the pattern analysis helpful in

determining where a sentence should end. In doing a pattern analysis during a conference with the teacher, he read his sentence and found that there were three functions. He felt this was too "heavy" so he separated the two that seemed to work together and put the other one in a sentence on its own. Although there was never a mention of the original punctuation error, by analyzing the sentence functions, the student reassessed his punctuation choices.

Implications in Academic Tasks

The signal + pattern method may also be useful in combining skills to complete other academic tasks. It facilitates sharper reading response strategies. For example, a student learns that he may be able to answer a short comprehension question without actually understanding the information. Given, "The shallops get angry when they don't scrush in the morning" and asked, "What makes shallops angry?", students can infer that "not scrushing in the morning makes shallops angry." This demonstrates how a student can cope with concept relationships when challenged by unfamiliar vocabulary. It is important to get the beginning student to realize that total comprehension of every word is not always realistic and that he needs to use strategies to help him compensate and exploit what he does know.

Secondly, sensitivity to signals and patterns helps in the interactive (top-down and bottom-up) processing of reading as it fosters anticipation and semantic monitoring (Dubin and Bycina, 1991). Thirdly, signals and patterns can provide cues for student note-taking. Lastly, they can also help the student select essential

pieces of information and their relationships for paraphrasing.

Through this signal + pattern approach, what begins as instruction and practice of effective reading strategies can become a greater wealth of strategies applicable to the writing process and study skills. The signal + pattern approach provides one way of integrating reading and writing instruction, and it develops student expertise in establishing and satisfying reader expectations. This approach respects the student's ability to generate ideas and provides strategies for expressing them effectively in English. Through this process, the student also learns that writing and logic are culture specific (Kaplan 1972) and that written English is comprised of many conventions and stylistic patterns perhaps different from his native language.

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About the Author

Aimee Meditz is pursuing a master's degree in TESOL at Ohio University after having taught six years in Casablanca, Morocco.