
Improved Reading Through Writing

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Throughout the history of language teaching and certainly at the present time, there has been a great deal of variety in focus and underlying psychological and linguistic principles and methodology. Nevertheless, most teachers and methods have one thing in common—they recognize four distinct language skills and present each in a particular way and order.

In the years I have been teaching, a significantly different idea has become more and more clear to me. The four skills are not or should not be separate and distinct. Each of the skills can be used to help fulfill the objectives of a course basically focused on the development of one of these skills. Because of the intrinsic interrelation of the four skills, each can and should be used to reinforce the others.

For some time now, my colleagues and I have been introducing the spoken language into the reading classroom through the oral analysis and discussion of the texts as well as specially prepared laboratory programs which include films, slide projections and tapes related to the reading texts. All of these oral activities are carried out in English with as little recourse as possible to the native language. The emphasis in these activities is on *communication* in English and encouraging students to think in English rather than translating back and forth from the native language. Errors in grammar and pronunciation are therefore not always corrected if they do not interfere with the

communication of the idea. The increase in motivation and favorable attitudes from the students alone have convinced us of the effectiveness of this method.

However, the lack of time, the size of the classes, and our teaching load have prevented most of us from integrating writing into our classes to any great extent. I have attempted to remedy this situation over the past few months.

Integrating Writing into the Reading Class

When I speak of writing in an advanced reading class, I am not referring to fill in the blank or complete the sentence type of exercises. I am not even referring to the lists of so called "comprehension" questions, so common in textbooks, which simply call for identifying and copying specific details from the text. (After all, who really cares how many oranges Mrs. Smith bought at the supermarket.) These types of exercises tend to focus on individual words and scattered ideas rather than on the integration of these ideas into a whole. I have found the most effective exercises to be those which require the student to process and restructure the information, infer ideas, interpret concepts, predict, conclude or imagine. The more involved the reader is with the text, the better his comprehension and retention become.

The following are some examples of writing exercises which can be used with

any reading text at the different stages of reading:

I. Before reading:

- 1) Looking only at the title, write five questions you think will be answered in the text.
- 2) Write a description of a table, graph, or picture accompanying the text.

II. While reading:

- 1) Write a one sentence summary of each paragraph.
- 2) Draw a table, graph, or outline, and fill in the main ideas and supporting details from the text.

III. After reading:

- 1) Try to write the answers to the questions you wrote before reading the text. (Remember, the text may not have answered all of your questions.)
- 2) Write the main idea of the text in one sentence.
- 3) Write the purpose of the author. Why did the author write this text? What is the author trying to do?
- 4) Write one new thing you learned from this text.
- 5) Looking only at the outline you wrote while reading, write a one paragraph summary of the text.
- 6) Write your conclusions after reading this text.
- 7) Write your opinion of the text. Do you agree with the ideas put forward? Why or why not?
- 8) After reading this text, what new questions occur to you that you would like to find answers to?
- 9) If the text is an extract rather than a complete article, how do you think it continues?

If you find your students seem to be suffering from “writer’s block”, you might begin by using George Jacobs’ technique of “quickwriting”. Write the general topic of the reading text on the blackboard and tell students to start writing and continue until you tell them to stop. They are to concentrate on content and not worry about form. If they cannot think of anything to write, they should repeat the last word or phrase or just write “I can’t think of anything to write” again and again until they think of something. Jacobs says this technique helps writers develop new ideas and encourages them to think in the target language.

◀ Why Write to Improve Reading?

There are a number of good reasons for incorporating writing into a reading class.

1) To monitor comprehension and recall.

As all teachers know, the best way to find out if a person really understands something is to have him explain it to another. Writing this explanation encourages the person to organize his thoughts and present them in a structured, logical format. Sandra Stotsky, in her review of research dealing with the reading/writing relationship, reported that almost all of the studies in which writing activities were used specifically to improve reading comprehension and recall found significant gains.

2) To clarify ideas and facilitate analysis.

As the writer transforms the ideas presented in the text into his own words and format (an outline, graph, table, chart, etc.), the relationship between these ideas becomes evident. It also becomes much easier to identify any ambiguities, errors

or omissions present in the original text. As Jeannette Veatch states in *Key Words to Reading* (1979), "Writing, by its very nature, is an analytical skill or ability. Therefore, the sooner a child can write independently, the sooner he can read independently."

3) To emphasize certain rhetorical concepts basic to reading comprehension.

Students given practice in writing topic sentences, concluding statements, definitions, steps in a process, hypotheses vs. facts, etc. are much more likely to be able to identify them later in a reading text.

4) To increase vocabulary.

As students write, they will ask or look for words. Since it is well known that meaningful ideas are best remembered, it follows that students will more easily remember words they ask for.

5) To encourage creativity.

Ever since Goodman's famous description of reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game," we have become more and more aware of the need for creativity in efficient reading. Since this involves a certain amount of risk taking, encouraging students to try to predict ideas and recreate texts through private writing exercises rather than oral statements made in front of the whole class may produce better results.

6) To provide time for reflection.

A foreign language reading class in which the text analysis is being carried out orally in the foreign language means that an enormous amount of concentration is needed on the part of the students to process the oral language and relate it to

the written text. There comes a time when everyone, especially the slower students, simply needs a break. A short, individual writing exercise is excellent for this. It gives students time to think quietly and organize their ideas. I have also found that slower students who rarely volunteer in oral discussions will ask me to check what they have written, then are the first to want to read their exercises aloud to the class. Being able to read what they have written gives them the self confidence they need.

A Final, Very Important Point

These writing exercises should not be graded. Many of them will not even be corrected by the teacher. If any credit is given for them, it should be on the basis of ideas, logic, completeness, and not on form. Some of them may be shared with other students in groups or the teacher may walk around the room to get a general idea of common mistakes to point out to the class. Sometimes students may volunteer to read their ideas or write them on the board. But they should not feel the pressure of grades on their written work. They should feel free to put their ideas down on paper, and then share them or not as they wish, since the basic premise underlying this type of exercise is that the writing process itself will improve reading comprehension. The objective of this course is reading comprehension, not writing. Writing is used as a means to reach that goal.

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