

*Towards a Sound Acquisition of Writing Skill through Reading
Literature*

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Abstract

Writing is a form of communication that allows students to put their feelings and ideas on paper, to organize their knowledge and beliefs into convincing arguments, and to convey meaning through well-constructed text. In its most advanced form, written expression can be as vivid as a work of art, it is the most interesting activity one could do in their lifetime. In an EFL context, however, writing is a very complex process, and there are few for whom this skill evolve easily. One reason that writing is so difficult relates to the fact that, in addition to knowing the appropriate grammar and vocabulary, a writer's ideas have to be presented clearly and in an organized fashion. Its mastery is an overwhelming obstacle for learners; they are often diagnosed with a learning disability. Often, this is due to a lack of proficiency in the receptive skills like reading and listening. Nevertheless, sometimes learners lack the interest and especially the desire to write in the first place.

Literary texts offer a rich source of linguistic input and can help learners to improve their writing skills by exemplifying grammatical structures and presenting new vocabulary.

The present paper aims at investigating how reading and writing can be interrelated in an EFL class. It also attempts to see how the use of a small piece of literature through teaching visualization, can stimulate students writing abilities and supply them with a certain energy that may bring life into their learning process.

Key words: EFL teaching, literature, reading / writing connection, visualization.

ملخص

تعتبر الكتابة من اهم المهارات التي يكتسبها المتعلم في مسار تعلمه فهي وسيلة تواصل يستعملها للتعبير عن أفكاره، قناعاته، وأحاسيسه. لكن حتن يتعلق الأمر بالكتابة بلغة أجنبية يصعب الأمر عن المتعلم اذ يتعرض الي خوف وقلق شديد قد يحول بينه وبين القدرة على التعبير عن نفسه بصفة صحيحة وجيدة، والسبب الرئيس المؤدي لهذا العجز هو نقص رصيده اللغوي. من اهم الأسباب التي تجعل عملية الكتابة امرا صعبا وشاقا على كل متعلم للغة الأجنبية هو ان بالإضافة الي ضرورة اتقان المفردات والصيغة المناسبة، يجب على الكاتب ترتيب أفكاره بطريقة واضحة سهلة الفهم. وفي الواقع هذا ما يشكل عائقا وعمبا كبيرا على الكاتب حتن يصبح عاجزا بل وأحيانا يفقد الرغبة تماما في مواصلة الكتابة.

لهذا تعتبر قراءة النصوص الأدبية مصدرا غنيا لتزويد المتعلم باللغة وأثراء رصيده اللغوي من صيغ صرفية او نحوية بالإضافة الي اكتساب مفردات جديدة مما يساهم في تطوير مهاراته الكتابية.

من اهم النقاط المستهدفة في هذا المقال هي البحث أولا عن كيفية وصل القراءة بالكتابة بطريقة سلسة وناجحة في حصة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. الهدف الثاني هو محاولة اثبات كيف يمكن لقراءة نص ادبي المساهمة في تحستن مستوى التعبير الكتابي عند المتعلم مما قد يمنحه أكثر طاقة وحيوية في مشواره التعليمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، النص الادبي، علاقة القراءة بالكتابة.

1- Introduction:

Writing is a continuous process of discovering how to find the most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. It may seem easier when heard at the first time but, actually it requires lot of skill to get used to it, probably, it is the most interesting activity one could do in their lifetime. In an EFL context, however, writing is a very complex process, and there are few for whom this skill evolve easily. In an attempt to overcome such a problem, many scholars specialized in the field of teaching have suggested that EFL students' writing proficiency and creativity may be developed and improved through reading literature.

2- Writing as a major skill in learning a language:

One way to look at writing is to see it as marks on page or a screen, a coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences structured according to a system of rules Hyland (1996). In its most advanced form, written expression can be as vivid as a work of art. One reason that writing is so difficult relates to the fact that, in addition to knowing the appropriate grammar and vocabulary, a writer's ideas have to be presented clearly and in an organized fashion. Its mastery is an overwhelming obstacle for EFL learners; they are often diagnosed with a learning disability. Often, this is due to a lack of proficiency in the receptive skills like reading and listening. Sometimes learners lack the interest and especially the desire to write in the first place. Consequently, it is believed that one of the major elements of mastering a language is to read its literature, since it may allow the learner to grasp a certain linguistic competence and writing in the target language will be no more an uphill process. However, a question that has to be raised here: Why reading literature in particular?

3- Importance of using literature in ELT:

A literary text rather than any other kind of texts treats real life situations and universal exciting themes such as love, war and family, which indirectly attract the learners, and invite them to think in a more critical way. Moreover, it develops the learner's interpretative abilities where the text may not be received technically but it is rather grasped personally.

When we talk about the use of literature as a tool or as a language provider, the genre selected to work with is not so important, whether it is a play, a novel, a poem or any other literary genre. Since the aim targeted to be achieved is the same. It is up to the teacher to choose the material that fits with the course objectives.

Most convincingly, by reading students discover that the field of literature holds an incredible and never-ending source of motivating writing tasks as well as inspiring ideas to start writing. Consequently, the teacher may see the success of using literature in class through examining the extent to which students carry with them beyond the classroom an everlasting enjoyment for literature that is renewed as they continue to engage with literature throughout their personal lives.

“Literature is feeling and thoughts in black and white. It is the use of language to evoke a personal response in the reader or listener... Literature is a word of fantasy, horror, feelings, visions.....put into words”. (Lazar, 1993, p.1)

A small piece of literature may offer a rich source of linguistic input and can help learners to practice the four skills- reading, listening, speaking and writing- in addition to exemplifying grammatical structures and presenting new vocabulary. Language functions interrelate and students have to learn the foreign language in a holistic process in order to increase their linguistic ability. According to Lazar (1993), literature can be the vehicle to improve students’ overall language skills. As a result, EFL teachers have simultaneously to apply teaching activities that tend to combine the four modes to enhance both literacy and oral development.

Literary texts increase foreign language learners’ insight into learners’ ability to interpret discourse in different social and cultural target language context, i.e. they discover a new world and see new people through the means of written language. The fact that broadens their perspectives as individuals and sharpens their linguistic background of the target language as learners. Indeed, it is the appropriate space for discovering native writers’ styles and viewpoints. Students may also be able to improve their understanding of other cultures, awareness of difference and to develop tolerance and understanding.

It can be argued that reading literature in English does encourage students to become broadly aware of the social, political and historical events, which form the background to a particular literary text. For this reason, literature seems to provide a way of contextualization how a number of a particular society may behave or react in a specific situation. More interestingly, it can provide them with insight into a new culture different from their own, possible relationships, emotions and attitudes of the inhabitants of a given setting. In this context Holden (1988) notes that one of the best ways to find out how other people think is, reading literature. A piece of literature is condensed life; it is real life related through an author.

4- Applying the reading writing connection in an EFL classroom:

Although writing can be considered as a natural talent, but it is a primarily learnt art through which students are taught all the formal and technical aspects of using a language, relying primarily on their own creativity to write. More seriously, the goal of writing instruction in an EFL context, can never be just training in explicitness and accuracy because written texts are always a response to a particular communicative setting. No feature can be a universal marker of good writing because good writing is always contextually variable (Harris & Graham, 1996). Thus, fostering L2 students' expressive abilities through reading a piece of literature encourages them to find their own voices to produce writing that is fresh and spontaneous and started seeing the writing skill as a creative act of self-discovery.

In an attempt to define reading and writing as two important interrelated skills in language teaching, Cook & Prather (1994) say "when we write, we turn ideas over in our minds and try to find the best combination of words to convey these ideas... Only by working, by writing, by practicing the art of language and regularly that a writer develops his ears, i.e. that sense which eventually enables a writer to hear where the power of the word lies and, ultimately, his own voice "the individual use of language". Reading and writing, in fact are natural partners; practice with one contributes to the success of the other. Writers usually write to be read and readers read what writers have written. Readers become writers when they write about what they have read. Writers become readers when they read or edit what they have written.

4-1- Text selection:

Concerning text selection, it is preferable for the teacher to try to choose his course material according to his students' needs (course objectives) and interests (students' age, level, culture, and perspectives). A fact strongly agreed on by psychologist is that learners can experience optimum learning while participating and taking part into the classroom discussion. The fact that provides a chance for the students' active involvements and full engagement in the learning process.

The purpose of getting students to acquire their love for literature is to broaden their viewpoints, their self-confidence and their active role as social members. In addition, the selection of texts foster the joy of reading because once the students feel that they are involved in the story they will find themselves unconsciously interacting with it, the fact that pushes them to write and to express their personal interpretations.

Coming back to the idea of hearing to learners' needs and interest, the teacher here may fail to convince students about the utility of reading literature especially if they refuse to acquire such an activity in the first place. Today's students are a totally visually- oriented generation who consider the reading of old boring stories as an old-fashioned archaic practice. Therefore, if the teacher fails to invite students to discover the pleasure of reading literature, he might attract their attention to the importance of reading as an initial and typical practice in their learning process (i.e. any other kind of texts), the fact that no one can deny.

Applying the reading-writing connection in the EFL classroom may not be so easy; in fact, it needs a strong and powerful collaboration between the teacher and the learner. This attribution can be achieved through a series of activities like the following:

4-2- Stimulating students writing creativity through literature:

The teacher supplies the students with extracts from selected stories to help them elicit their eagerness to write. After reading the extracts, students will be asked to write what they think will happen next, or what they think happened just before. This process of reading and responding to literature

broadly gives them rich models to draw on when making their own writing. In order to make sure that reading and writing are working together appropriately in this activity, some issues have to be taken into consideration:

- The amount of reading assigned, for example, has to be limited so that students will have more time to devote themselves to their writing.
- It is also preferable to create at least one writing assignment (perhaps a short one) in which students are asked to analyse how an argument is constructed or how a story is developing, rather than focusing exclusively on the content.
- Language accuracy is not going to be neglected, however, the teacher may provide students with models of good or bad writing, taking time in class to talk about that.
- Simultaneously, students can learn new composing strategies from each other as they notice how their peers as different writers tackle the same idea with varying approaches.

As a class activity, the previous practice has several advantages:

- It encourages students to think about the state of progress of their own writing, its strengths and weaknesses.
- It gives the teacher insights into the students' perceptions of writing and their expectations of the course and the teacher as well.

4.4.3 Visualization and the Reading-Writing Connection:

Before the teacher could get his students visualizing² as writers, he tries to get them visualizing as readers. Visualizing is the first step in getting struggling readers to activate their thinking skills and that they have to visualize before they can move to higher levels of understanding.

Start by teaching visualization through a series of read-alouds. Talk about how when you read a book and you love it, it is like seeing a movie in your mind, that the words become pictures and characters take the shape of people you know and care about. At this stage the teacher is going to pick up the literary work according to his students' needs and interest.

After having all reading the story, he starts his class discussions by describing the movie they saw in their heads while they read.

From discussions like this one, students begin drawing what they visualized in their reading response journals, then talking about their visualizations in small groups or with the whole class. Through this process of sharing and comparing images, the students begin to understand how readers are partially responsible for creating the text they read and their response journals reflected this.

The students begin to take ownership of what they read and to realize that what they see in their own mind is as much a part of reading as the words on the page; they begin to understand that reading itself is an act of creation. Here, no two students will have the exact same image since, good readers take ownership of texts they read, and practicing visualizations helped those struggling readers become active thinkers instead of passive receivers of information. Written words may not be so scary and foreign anymore; they are tools to be picked up and used. Students can be ready to struggle with ideas and words of their own.

Conclusion:

Learning to write in a foreign language is a real struggle for most students. Even with simple writing exercises, students often lose interest and do not complete them. Indeed, research on this issue indicates that creating a good piece of writing is considered an extremely difficult skill, even in one's own native language. Besides, the majority of learners are not aware of the strong relationship that lies between reading and writing. It is the teacher's role, however, to raise their awareness and show them where is the pleasure of discovering such a relationship. Therefore, teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to write about topics that are relevant to their lives as individuals, to participate in various writing activities, and to feel that their writing has a certain value. By integrating writing with content at every level of instruction, teachers help learners find their own voices in their new language and develop the ability to communicate effectively in different contexts and with different audiences.

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