

"EXPLOITING THE READING -WRITING RELATIONSHIP TO DEVELOP WRITING COMPETENCE IN EFL"

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The acquisition of writing competence is regarded by many practioners and researchers as the most problematic aim to achieve in a second/foreign language. In many ESL contexts (U.S., Canada etc.) where second language learners are exposed to language-rich environments outside the classroom, the W(1) course is integrated into the R(1) course as both share a common modality. In classroom activities that involve R, a large amount of input is provided so that learners can build their hypotheses about the target language. This input is then exploited by the teacher in W activities and students can capitalize on it to develop their W competence.

It would be tautological to say that R and W share features in common: W is needed in several R tasks (answering comprehension questions, supplying missing words in a cloze text, etc.). But going beyond this obvious interaction between R and W, in classroom activities, the R-W relationship can become critical to the development of the students'W ability. As Krashen (1984: 20) remarks, "It is reading that gives the writer the "feel" for the look and texture of reader-based prose".

Because R and W share structural components, whatever is acquired in R could be exploited in W. But to be effective, this exploitation has to be done when R and W activities have a common focus of attention. For instance, focussing on reading strategies that help to recognize cause and effect, comparison and contrast or story schemata, and applying these rhetorical

patterns in W. This "transfer of structural information" (Eisterhold 1990) from R to W (and from W to R) has been highlighted in several studies. Most of the research carried out on L1 (Eckhoff 1983) has revealed that the R to W transfer is the most common directional model of language learning. It has also been demonstrated that additional instruction in R is even more successful to develop learners' writing competence than grammar or W exercises (Storsky 1983). A number of studies on L2 have also contributed to the understanding of the R-W relationship and of the psycholinguistic issue of "transfer" across modalities and across languages⁽²⁾ (Shanklin 1982, Belanger 1987, Freedle 1985, Carson et al 1990) and have documented the effectiveness of R in W instruction.

The aim of this paper is to suggest a reflexion on R and W instruction at first year undergraduate level in the light of these studies, and to see the extent to which exploiting the R-W relationship in W activities could enhance students' W ability. The question of how an adult (or young adult) learner learns to write in a FL is still not answered because of the complexity of the cognitive skills involved. But the question of the acquisition of literacy skills (i.e. R and W) is worth examining insofar as it could shed light on this complexity. This acquisition is of crucial importance during the initial year of English study as the majority of courses make great demand on these skills, and this over four years⁽³⁾. When we look at the weekly time-table allocated to the first year EFL syllabus at the university of Algiers, we can note that, of the 22 hours of instruction, 16 hours are spent on language-oriented courses and 10 hours to the acquisition of literacy skills⁽⁴⁾ (only 6 hours to knowledge-oriented courses). This seems a reasonable amount of time devoted to the development of these skills. But success or failure in this endeavour much depends on course design and teaching procedures. As a case in point, the English curriculum in this department emphasizes discreteness of its components rather than integration. It rests on a discrete view of language and language learning that segments instruction into small entities (grammar, phonetics, reading comprehension, etc.) and results in a didactic approach more "dissective"/analytic than integrative/synthetic⁽⁵⁾. With respect to the teaching of R and W, these skills have always been broken down into two separate subjects, taught by two different teachers, with a greater time allocation to W. Such separation, seemingly based on the psycholinguistic argument that comprehension and production are different cognitive processes yet ignores the important argument of their interdependence. From the point of view of student's performance in these skills, below average marks are regularly obtained by a majority of students and W especially is the Cinderella skill with respect to students

achievement as the weakest marks are obtained in this subject despite the great number of hours allocated to it.

It is clear that students gain no benefit from such separation. The R-W relationship that should be stressed through instruction is ignored more often than not, and the implications for students' performance are far-reaching as many of them find difficulties integrating information (facts, ideas, etc.) from their readings into W(6), specially in their subsequent years of English study. Exploiting the connection between R and W through the integration of these skills into a common course at an initial level of instruction (though not exclusively) is of high pedagogical value. From a psycholinguistic point of view, this would enhance the interrelatedness of two skills that continually interact. Furthermore exploiting this relationship sensibly could allow transfer into W ability. For instance recognizing a discourse pattern in a text (e.g. comparison and contrast, exposition) as part of a R strategy could allow the learner to reproduce that pattern in W and learn it. If R texts could function as "comprehensible input" for W tasks, R instruction could indeed reveal its effectiveness in improving W. Literacy acquisition being one of the objectives of undergraduate studies, R and W could be developed together, with a focus on R as an important source of information.

Conclusion:

The stage of learning how to write through using R knowledge and strategies is of crucial importance since nothing elaborate can be developed in the learner if this stage has been underrated. If R activities are not conducive to sophisticated W behaviours, at least at this first year level, then ground will have been lost before the students get to years 2, 3 and 4. The syllabus in these subsequent years making heavy demand on their literacy skills, they will already be on a "remedial" basis to compensate for these skills. The feeling of hopelessness experienced by a number of weak students having missed the opportunity to develop their literacy skills adequately is also disheartening for many teachers!

Preparing students for the acquisition of language proficiency and of literacy skills specifically is a vital first year objective, and integrating R into W means exploiting the R-W relationship to provide opportunities for intralinguistic transfer to occur. Teachers could make this relationship explicit when teaching and/or designing syllabi that integrate this notion of transfer because W is not a separate language skill, and R for a W purpose can foster large amounts of motivation and pleasure.

Notes:

- (1) - W and R for "writing" and "reading" used throughout.
- (2) - But only transfer across modalities is treated here.
- (3) - As a matter of fact answers to test papers on all subjects-except for Oral Expression, are done in writing.
- (4) - i.e. reading comprehension = 2hrs, written expression = 4 hrs, grammar 4 hrs.
- (5) - If there is "clarity" about ends there is confusion about means.
- (6) - See Campbell 1990 on this point.

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