

## **The reading-focused work**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper describes the introduction of the “free voluntary reading” course (Krashen, 1993) to the second year students at the University of Mascara. It aims to highlight the effect of a selected reading on the writing of this population. The results showed that there was a considerable amount of enhancement in the writing quality as well as the ensuing discovery of the learners’ style.*

### **The Nature of Reading and Writing**

Reading and writing are both considered as skills, products, or processes depending on the theoretical point of view. Yet, sometimes different people with different viewpoints have alternative definitions of reading and writing. For instance, for some reading and writing are seen as complex unitary skills made up of numerous subskills acquired through instruction. For others, they are the products of skill acquisition, with comprehension and composition being the observable elements. Still others consider reading and writing as processes an individual undertakes to construct meaning from print or to construct meaning using print respectively. It is the view that teachers and practitioners have about reading and writing that influences therefore how these essential productive skills are taught.

Langer (1986) states that regardless of the researchers' and practitioners' descriptions, the interrelationships among the language arts are complex, not readily apparent and least of all clearly understood. And, yet today they are often taken for granted. To fully understand how reading and writing are connected, it is primordial first to discuss them separately and to look at their differences as well as their similarities.

Traditionally reading and writing were viewed as basic skills treated as separate subjects in the schools. Reading is a receptive skill, whereas writing is expressive in nature. The ultimate goal of the teaching/learning process has always been to create skillful readers and writers.

### **The Skills of Reading and Writing**

To acquire reading and writing, traditional arts programs used to support the notion of sequentially ordered reading and writing skills. The global skills of reading include word recognition and comprehension. The skills of writing on the other hand are more extensive and incorporate grammar, usage and spelling as well as matters of style and forms of discourse.

Language development through reading and writing is hierarchical in nature. Phrased in another way, the learner learns to recognize letters, before he learns to decode words. He also learns to write a sentence, then he learns to write a paragraph. Yet as far as reading is concerned, Dowling (1982) states that there is little evidence to support the idea that there exists a true hierarchy of skills.

So that reading and writing could be teachable, they necessitate breaking down into more manageable units.

This is seen in William Gray's (1960) skills model of reading. In fact, Gray proposes that individuals learn to read first by matching sounds to letters before progressing to whole-word identification. However, Gray believes that reading is a complex unitary skill made up of numerous subskills that not only are closely interrelated but also function simultaneously. Fluency in reading is gauged through instantaneous recognition of words without conscious effort (laBerge & Samuels, 1976).

Traditional models of writing also focus on the parts in relationship to the whole. The traditional paradigm's features include the analysis of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument, the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation), and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis) (Young, 1978:31).

Textbooks which are the primary influence in classroom instruction have perpetuated traditional instruction (Applebee, 1986). Through their pages, skills are listed and the complexity of writing is highlighted by lessons where written expression is broken down into components parts. Success in writing is measured by the application of the newly acquired skills. In theory, if the students know the rules of grammar, they will appropriately apply them when composing. In practice, however, Hillocks (1987) states that decades of research into the teaching of writing reveals that knowledge of grammatical rules alone does not improve one's writing. There are even instances where though the students know the rules perfectly, they falter when writing. This is but another issue where the students are busy trying to transfer what they want to say forgetting for that while the rules of grammar.

### **The Relationship between Reading and Writing**

What do word recognition and comprehension skills have in common with sentence construction, paragraph development, spelling, grammar, punctuation, or text structure? Various studies have attempted to show the correlation between the skills of reading and writing. Stotsky (1983) argues that many studies have tried to demonstrate that better reading comprehension and vocabulary scores were positively related to good quality writing.

Most studies examining the influence of reading on writing and of writing on reading generally support the idea that growth in one area will probably carry over into the other. The concern of this paper however is mainly the influence of reading on writing.

Zamel (1992) states that the complementary processes of writing and reading must be integrated. She believes that to fully understand what goes on in the writing mind, one must reflect on how writers interact with texts and readers. She suggests what researchers like Krashen (1984), Raimes (1992), Hansen (1987) propose, a fully integration of reading and writing skills development. The integration of the two skills will enable L2 writers to experience how readers interact with texts. The processes of making meaning in reading, interacting with text, and raising awareness of readers' goals will be among the analysed factors for practical classroom application. Through these processes, Zamel (1992) adds, students can make the process of discovering the importance of goal and audience in writing more valid.

For classroom application, she suggests the following activities: logs, reactions, and sharing with other students. She says:

Because these activities allow students to actively engage and grapple with texts, to explore how and why texts affect them, they can make discoveries about what other readers do with texts they compose. They come to realize that if reading involves reconstruction, they must help guide readers of their own texts in that reconstruction...  
(Zamel, 1992:481)

Richard-Amato (2003) believes that writing and reading are two parallel processes of meaning construction, drawing on a common repertoire of cognitive, communicative and linguistic strategies. In a writing task, be it an assessment task or a usual classroom activity the students find themselves confronted to a task where they assess themselves as readers-writers where they have to make the connection they find between their reading and the writing processes in terms of what the two processes require.

The two productive skills (Robinett, 1978) are reciprocal and mutually informative processes serving as input and output for each other (Tierney & Shanaham, 1996). So are they because the learners find themselves writing better on account of what they have read.

### **How to Bridge the Huge Gap between Writing and Reading**

The core concern of this paper is how to make the students read. The students do read, but they read what they prefer. Therefore, the assigned readings must first and foremost be in accord with the learners' preferences. The readings also

must be carefully selected to show students how other writers have approached the different types of writing, whether narrative or descriptive or argumentative etc.

The reading must be most of all enjoyable and entertaining. The books that are in the library are but those classical books which are too hard and too lengthy for the new reader: our learner. The library should include new voices, contemporary writers such as Paul Auster, Don Brown, Stephen Clarke, Bret Easton Ellis, to cite but a few talented writers.

To confirm or refute the effectiveness and certainly the impact of the kind of reading we underpin, we assigned a writing task to the second year students. The task consisted of a written activity based on a reading the students had read. Right from the beginning of the year, the second year students were given a short story to read. The story is entitled: *Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat*.

*Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat* is a short story that was extracted from Roald Dahl's book *Completely Unexpected Tales*. It is a short story of sixteen (16) pages. This short story was mainly chosen because it is highly entertaining. It is different from the usual assignments that are considered as chore by our students in general and by the second year students in particular.

The reading was assigned to the students because they often encounter difficulty in finding a topic to write on. As mentioned earlier, reading will be a supporting aid as it will provide the students with a story which is different from what they are used to in their culture. It is an interesting prompt that will engender a vivid reaction because of the nature of the story. This is also another reason why the story was chosen.

Roald Dahl narrates a story of a woman Mrs Bixby who had a lover, the colonel. She discovered that her husband Mr Bixby had a mistress when her love story with the colonel came to end. The students' reactions were diverse, very interesting, and much unexpected to say the least. The goal was to raise a debate.

The story was also chosen because it was attractive, entertaining and most of all easy to be understood by the majority of the students. Because the story has an open-end, it must be confessed that many students raised many questions. Indeed, many of the learners, especially girls, asked many pertinent questions to which we have hinted to the possibilities of understanding the story. For instance, we state: maybe Mr Bixby knew about his wife's love affair long ago. Behind our suggestions, we aimed to urge our students to read between the lines, so to speak.

The task consisted of three questions from which the students were to choose only one. The three questions were:

- Summarize the story
- Imagine an end to the story, or suggest another end to the story
- What would you do if you were in the place of either Mrs Bixby or Mr Bixby?

By summarizing the story, the students are expected to retell the story that they have read and, most of all that they have understood. It is more retelling that summarizing because we take into account the fact that the students are not supposed to be "tested" on something they have not been taught.

For the second question, the students are required to have read and understood the story. The fact that the story

has an open-end, will urge the learners to imagine what would happen. In other words, they will finish the story. They might as well end the story as they will wish it to end. It might have a dramatic ending or a happy ending.

As far as the third question is concerned, to react as one character might react there is a need for understanding the story. The reaction of the students will be understood because of one's own culture. Though Mrs Bixby had been unfaithful to her husband, the girls forgot all about her deeds and put the whole blame on the husband. Some African students (students from Mali and Niger) reacted differently. Ignoring the wife is not enough for them. They wanted a more severe punishment. There was no place of forgiveness.

The task was assigned in a stress free environment where students were allowed to talk to their friends if need be. They were also free to use dictionaries and the like. Many times the students were seen discussing the story, explaining certain points to each other in their mother tongue. They were given time in class to jot down notes and begin to write. The papers, all of them handwritten, were handed in the next day. From our point of view, the papers can be treated as rough drafts. They have all the signs of early drafts and seemed to cry out for revision.

The rough drafts that follow were selected randomly. These are authentic student writings; illustrating their way of answering the above three mentioned questions. These examples are presented 'warts and all' without correction on language or spelling.

### **Student 1**

*In the end of the story, Mr Bixby was very angry because she thought that the pawnbroker cheated her. She went out of her husband's office.*



*At that moment, she met Miss pulteny, the secretary-assistant. she was like a queen in the beautiful black mink coat that the colonel had given to Mrs Bixby.*

*Mrs Bixby by realize the relationship betw her husband and Miss pulteny.*

*If I were Mrs. Bixby I would never regretted, because from the beginning I'm the wrong one. I would try to convince my husband of my reasons and why I do this. I lost the colonel, so i try not to loose my husband.*

### **Student 2 (Benin)**

*The story of Mr Bixby and Mrs Bixby was a sad end for Mrs Bixby. After coming back from Baltimore with separation of the colonel, she was confronted to another disappointment. Her mink which the colonel gave her created some troubles because she couldn't move with it at home. In order to avoid any problems, she brought it to the pawnbroker who gave her a ticket. Believed that she found the solution to her problems, the ticket was taken by her husband. Mrs bixby revolted but at the end she couldn't empede him to take the ticket shown at the beginning to him as a lottery ticket. When her husband brought the mink, he exchanged it by a neckpiece of fur. Be impatient to see her mink, she came in her husband office to see the surprise. Unfortunatly, she saw that it was not the mink but a ridiculous neckpiece of fur. Angrily, she left from her husband office in order to kill the pawnbroker who, for her exchanged the mink. But outside in her way of lunch she saw the secretary of Mr Bixby like a queen in the mink coat which the colonel gave her. So, she discovered that her husband had a relationship with his secretary.*

*(Student 2 was the only student who was seen revising her writing.)*

### **Student 3**

*The writer let the end implicit*

*The writer let the end of the story implicit, but if the reader understand the story from the beginning especially the part when Mrs Bixby showed the ticket to her husband and how he assisted to go to the pawnbroker, surely the reader understand that Mr Bixby had a secret (something hidden).*

*He gave the coat of mink to miss Pulteney and a neck-piece to his wife, and he told her that he would be late that night, and of course, he had an affair with his secretary-assistant especially it was Christmas day.*

*The end of the story of Mrs Bixby and the colonel's coat was a wonderful end. Believe me it makes me happy especially when Mrs Bixby saw the secretary assistant wore the coat. I imagine myself there and laugh on her because I feel pity on Mr Bixby who was a slave and a victim of a lecherous woman of no importance.*

*At the end, Mrs. Bixby understand the trick especially when she saw miss pulteney wore the coat and walked as a queen.*

*And in that case it depended on Mrs Bixby what she should do because she became a real victim, so she had to choose either to have others dirty dogs like the colonel or challenge Mrs pulteney to get her husband; what seems to me that she doesn't think about divorce at all because she know that she will lose every things.*

#### **Student 4**

*Mr. and Mrs Bixby lived in a small house in New York City. Mr Bixby was a dentist. Once a month, on Friday afternoons, Mrs Bixby used to visit her aunt Maude, in Baltimore, and turn back home, the day after. One day during Mrs Bixby visit, she met a charming gentleman known as : colonel, who was the wealthiest in the city. Firstly, they became friends. Then their relationship grew more and more. They still see each other eight years. So, her aunt was just an alibi to meet her beloved. Once the colonel sent her an expensive coat within a letter saying no more meeting.ing the same coat given by the colonel to her. First, she had been shocked, but the coat helped her*

*to forget. At that time she was thinking of either keeping the coat or abandoning it. After she decided to keep it and to foolish her husband. Minutes after she put the coat in a pawn broker, she was home. Then she told her husband that she found the ticket of the pawn broker. After a discussion, they decided that the husband went to get the present. The day after, Mr Bixby got the present; at the same time his wife was anxious about it, so she went to his office. Here was the unexpected thing: Mrs Bixby found an other thing else: a neck piece. So she was surprised but did not want her husband to notice. The strange matter was: when Mrs Bixby ledt the room, she met her husband's secretary wearing the same coat given by the colonel to her. So, she understood that both she and her husband did deceived each other at the same time.*

### **Student 5**

*The and the story (change)*

*Mrs Bixby when she knew the truth that her husband betrayed her with the colonels'. So she lost her husband, her dirty dog the colonel and her expensive coat, this truth made her crasy and in bad sycology situation so, she entred the hospital for mad because she became a crazy women anu une care about her There she became more dangerous and she wanted all the time to kille the men like the doctors and the officers This tragedy made her husband who was there remorse for all what he did. One day he went to see her, but she become more crasy and more dangerous, this let the doctors refuse any visitor until she became good recovered.*

*After 2 years, she started to become normal person, and she demanded to see her husband who refused to see her, so this made her planning for revenge. When she went out she killed him and she endemened to perpetual to prison until her death.*

In studying students' approaches to this reading-to-write task, we have pondered on the following issues:

➤ How did the instructor represent the task of writing an essay based on a particular source (the story) and the process of writing in the classroom?

➤ What are the possible ways that the student-teacher interactions can influence how students negotiate and construct meaning in reading and writing?

What were students' interpretations of writing an essay based on sources: that is to say, what sorts of experience and knowledge would they draw on as primary information in completing the task?

The experience and knowledge may include the story the students have read, and their ways of reading and writing related to their social and intellectual background. As Banks (1996) points out, students' knowledge includes the concepts, explanation and interpretation that derive from personal experience at home or within their community; facts, interpretation that are disseminated through mass-media; and the kinds of generalizations and interpretations that students find in school, including textbooks, and teachers' lectures. Banks adds:

Although students may adopt a particular stance, conveying what might be construed as their own ideas in authoring a text, the ideas they hold are expressions of shared commitments and beliefs that are rooted in class, race, and gender.

(1996:132)

To fully understand the prescribed reading, though the reading was meant to entertain the students, we introduced the following questions to enhance the

students' appreciation of the story. These questions also raised a hot debate during the observation session.

- What character (s) was your favourite? Why?
- What character (s) did you dislike? Why?
- Does anyone in this work remind you of anyone you know?
- Are you like anyone in this work?
- If you could be any character in this work, who would you be?
- What quality (ies) of which character (s) strikes you as a good characteristic to develop within yourself over the years? Why? How does the character demonstrate this quality?
- Overall, what kind of feeling did you have after reading a few paragraphs of this work? Midway? After finishing the work?
- Do any incidents, ideas in this work remind you of your own life or something that happened to you? Explain.
- Do you like this piece of work? Why or why not?
- Are there any parts of this work that were confusing to you? Which parts? Why do you think you got confused?
- Do you feel there is an opinion expressed by the author through this work? What is it? How do you know this? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Do you think the title of this work is appropriate? Is it significant? Explain. What do you think the title means?
- Would you change the ending of the story in any way? Tell your ending. Why would you change it?
- What kind of person do you think the author is? What makes feel this way?
- How did this work makes you feel? Explain.

➤ Do you share any of the feelings of the characters in this work? Explain.

➤ Sometimes a work will leave you with a feeling that there is more to tell. Did this work do this? What do you think might happen next?

➤ Would you like to read something else by this author? Why or why not?

➤ What do you feel is the most important word, phrase, or paragraph in this work? Explain why it is important.

➤ If you were an English teacher, would you want to share this work with your students? Why or why not?

As a follow up activity, we assigned the following activities to enhance our students' motivation to read. Full short stories are handed to the students who are going to split into different groups each of whom is going a particular task. The first group turns the story into a dialogue which the second group is going to perform in front of the class. This activity is called script writing and requires a careful reading so that the writer's message is put across in the performed play.

Taste or Lamb to Slaughter are two examples of Dahl's short stories used in the script writing activity. In Lamb to Slaughter, a woman clubs her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, then covers the crime by roasting the meat as she chats innocently with the police detectives. This story was read in class. A hushed silence followed the reading and thirty seconds later questions, comments, theories, reactions erupted. Students called out, "Do you think the wife will really get away with it?" "I think the husband deserved it." "Who wrote this story? I love how the cops at

the end are eating the murder weapon." "Cool story—got any more by this guy?"

All in all these writing activities require reading first. They also will provoke a debate between students as everyone might understand the story in his own way. The activities do focus on the reading and writing, but they also give a high percentage of priority to speaking and listening among the different groups.

## **Results and Discussion**

As stated previously, reading has a great impact on writing. Research has demonstrated that the amount of reading successful writers do greatly contributes to proficiency in the skill of writing (Krashen, 1984). The kind of reading these writers usually do, include reading activities. They voluntary do it for pleasure or the reading they do for a specific learning purpose. The complementary processes of reconstructing meaning in reading and constructing meaning in writing were the main focus of this task.

A total of five stories were employed in our writing classes. This selection included:

- Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat
- A lamb to Slaughter
- The Story of the German Student
- Taste
- Man in the Dark

During these writing classes, we have first and foremost sought to create a friendly stress-free atmosphere where the students were given time to compose, and most of all they were given freedom to talk about the topics they wanted to talk about. This was but one way of addressing the emotional issues surrounding writing. The impact of

emotions on writing has been written about extensively (Boice, 1985; Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Marcel, 1999; Rose, 1988)

Many researchers believe that skills and emotions are intertwined. They also find out that if teachers provided adequate instructions and time to compose in class, some of the stress that fosters negative attitudes would be reduced.

We had given the students opportunities to compose text in situations where they were members of a positive, nonthreatening social climate in which they wrote frequently. Being part of a writing community- the groups, the writing teams- meant that the students experienced uninterrupted time for individual practice. When writing is given time and presence in the curriculum, students will improve at it (Boice, 1985).

Right from the very beginning of our writing classes, it was observed that many learners hated or avoided writing. Many students did not understand the process for accomplishing a particular task or the end result of a specific endeavor. This explains their repeated frustration. Therefore, to overcome this, specific lessons were designed to address the emotional issues and barriers surrounding writing that would help minimize the students' confusions. There were four major factors that contributed to the students' unrealistic expectations and negative perceptions of themselves as writers:

- Failure to understand and apply appropriate strategies when composing a text,
- A flawed understanding of the writing process,
- Confusion about what the assignment is asking them to do (e.g., inability to deconstruct a prompt)



➤ Unfamiliarity with the features of the assigned genre.

When faced with a writing assignment, many students face experienced writers' block. Their stress levels were greatly alleviated when they were provided with guideline for stating and completing the assignment. With writing on-demand, and with the reading they did -Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat-such blocks were partly overcome by activities such as brainstorming, speedwriting and partly by explicit instructions, writing prompts, not to mention strategies for planning. Many students did overcome their fear and their blocks by having the students work in groups and share their drafts as they wrote throughout the process and showcase good images and phases as well as whole pieces of writing. This acted as the models in the product writing approach but in this case the models were attainable because they were written by the students themselves.

This proved very effective. When we had the students share best sentences, they were still drafting and revising. The students who were recognised received an extraordinary boost while the others gained ideas that they adapted to their compositions.

To motivate the subjects, the best compositions were hanged on the hall for a period of a week. This is consistent with the views expressed by Moffett when he says "three things to do with the final versions of writing are post, print and perform (1981:25). This hall publication, or posters that used excerpts from the writing of many students, especially narrative, aimed at giving satisfactory recompense and at the same time at providing further

feedback from a larger audience about the effect of what one had written (Moffett, 1981:26).

The task proved highly effective in how to get rid of the disruptive emotions the students had when confronted to writing on demands. They had history of fear of the blank page and recollections of how long it takes and how difficult it is to generate texts not to mention how frustrated it feels to get a failing grade on writing assignment. Many students said that the activities like brainstorming, speedwriting, loopwriting etc. had helped them a lot in dealing with negative emotions. This was spotted by Boice (1985) when he talked about the internal critic (IC). He states that it is possible to instruct them on how to deal with negative emotions, such as to conquer the IC.

As far as the implemented story, we have noticed that:

- The students had a lot to say as opposed to other situation when they could not find what to say;
  - The students also enjoyed Roald Dahl's surprising revenge endings;
  - Their vocabulary was richer and there was a variety in their sentences;
  - There were students who used their imagination to add ideas and details that changed the whole story;
  - The activity proved very effective in providing the students with ideas to write about but the problem of inaccuracies that are due to the lack of revising still remain;
- To solve this problem, we have ventured the use of the students' writing in the revising session. This was but a proof of the increasing emphasis accorded to the students' writings. Indeed, an essay written by a fourth year student was featured in this session. The rationale behind this was

to introduce the students the idea of analysing an essay written by their mate, to see what strategies he had used, and to serve as a model for the students in which the voice of the writer is clear.

Hassan's essay was the first one the students' scripts used in this writing course. The researchers have made a collection of the best students' writings to serve as models. These models would motivate the other students to write and to overcome the idea that writing is reserved only to the professional writers. As the course developed, the students began to share their own essays and to ask for peers' impression on their writing.

Besides these resources, a variety of other texts were made available for those students who were more interested in further reading. These extra materials included: list of various books and forums, articles and so forth...

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