

Integrating Reading and Writing for Effective Language Teaching

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Writing is a difficult skill for native speakers and nonnative speakers alike, because writers must balance multiple issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics such as capitalization. Writing is especially difficult for nonnative speakers because they are expected to create written products that demonstrate mastery of all the above elements in a new language. In addition, writing has been taught for many years as a product rather than a process. Therefore, teachers emphasize grammar and punctuation rather than decisions about the content and the organization of ideas. My students tell me they have been exposed to the rules of writing and grammar from the outset without developing their ability to express their ideas.

Based on the positive findings of previous research with ESL students at the elementary level (Abu Rass 1997; Elley 1991; Ghawi 1996), I designed an integrated reading and writing course for first-year Arab EFL students at Beit Berl College, a four-year teacher training college in Israel.

Previous research

Elley (1991) writes about four studies comparing language development of children who learned a second language in traditional classrooms and those who participated in a book-based program in New Zealand. Results showed superior performance by participants in the book-based program in the three tests administered to examine its effectiveness. In comparisons, the participants in the book-based program outperformed their peers who learned in traditional classrooms.

Two other research projects were conducted at a university in Arizona to examine the usefulness of integrating language and content and exposing ESL students to a massive amount of reading (Abu Rass 1997; Ghawi 1996). In both case studies, participating students demonstrated significant gains in language proficiency. The students were also eager to read the assigned novels and enjoyed reading even though they encountered many unfamiliar words.

Integrated reading and writing course

Objective

The objective of the course at Beit Berl College was to help learners write more freely, naturally, and fluently while acquainting them with literature in the English language. Recognizing a well-written paragraph in English was the core of the course, as well as providing students with the techniques necessary to write paragraphs and five-paragraph essays in English.

Reading Requirements

To achieve the goals of the course, students were expected to read literature from anthologies, including *Tales from Many Lands: An Anthology of Multicultural Folk Literature* and *Prize Stories 1994: The O. Henry Awards*. The assigned list of reading also included some selected contemporary poetry in English. The aim was to expose Arab students to contemporary literature of the United States, as well as other parts of the world, in authentic English. Integrating literature helps second and foreign language learners improve their language proficiency and develop cultural awareness of the target language. Although they may face difficulty in reading novels and short stories, they can adjust themselves to the repeated vocabulary and the style of the writer (Coady 1979).

At the beginning of the first semester, the stories were simple ones and represented cultures from different parts of the world including Japan, Korea, and Europe. Texts that were easy to read were chosen to help students develop a habit of reading. Following Lazar (1993), literary criticism was not part of the instruction. The students were involved emotionally and linguistically through communicative activities. For example, they were expected to recall some events and predict others. Similarly, questions about the characters were asked.

Writing Requirements

Reading logs and worksheets were prepared and given to students to be completed. The reading logs included questions about difficult or challenging passages in the text, and the worksheets had questions about events, characters, and the students' opinions and reactions to the text. The aim for preparing these reading logs and worksheets was to encourage students to think through the questions, clarify and compose their responses on paper, and write extensively. For grading the logs and worksheets, I looked mostly at the content.

For their weekly assignments, students first wrote different kinds of paragraphs, starting with narration, followed by definition, and ending with persuasion. Exercises were given to familiarize the students with topic sentences and supporting sentences. Students were trained to develop the paragraph into an essay. They were encouraged to use the idea map, which orders information visually without any rigid hierarchy. The second step was ordering the ideas to have an outline for the five-paragraph essay. Writing an introductory paragraph, with its components such as the opening sentence and the thesis, was introduced. Similarly, examples of concluding paragraphs were given to help the students not only to understand the components of a five-paragraph essay, but also to be able to write them. Training students to prepare footnotes and outlines was also part of the syllabus.

Multiple drafts were required to allow students to work on content and to help the students overcome writing problems in a less threatening manner than seeing their papers covered with red ink, which discourages them from improving their writing. While the focus of the first and second drafts was the content and organization of thoughts, the focus of the final draft was grammar and punctuation.

Monthly journals were also a requirement. Students were expected to write informal journals about personal experiences. For instance, they reported about incidents that bothered or satisfied them. Two main goals were achieved. First, students had the chance to write in another genre.

Second, it was an effective way of familiarizing me as an instructor with the students and their way of thinking. By the end of the school year, we became closer to each other.

In-class activities

At the beginning of each session, the students were asked to write nonstop for five minutes to reflect on the assigned reading material or to make connections between what they had read and their daily lives. Since they shared their free writings with each other, these were used as a springboard for discussion as students read or paraphrased their writing aloud.

Discussing the stories didn't take long, so it was always part of the lesson. Usually students were expected to evaluate the stories by mentioning what they liked and what they didn't like in the story. Also, they discussed details about the characters and the events. Finally, they elaborated their answers on the worksheets.

Error analysis was the core of the writing class. It was done by typing the sentences or the mistakes on paper or transparencies, writing them on the blackboard, or preparing an inventory to be reviewed. The aim of typing the errors was to prevent students from recognizing other students' handwriting and thereby to avoid embarrassment and show them respect.

Since my students tend to write long sentences with the excessive use of *and*, samples of their long sentences were typed and given to them to work in pairs to shorten these sentences. While sometimes the errors were typed on transparencies and enlarged, other times they were written on the blackboard to be discussed. By the end of the first semester, an inventory of the types of the errors was developed to help the students analyze their mistakes and correct them. It included sentence level errors such as subject-verb disagreement, incorrect articles, adjectives acting as nouns, and improper verb tenses.

To help the students overcome psychological barriers, peer review was encouraged as a collaborative strategy to help them learn from each other. The aim of employing such a strategy was to lessen the degree of the students' apprehension because each was aware of the fact that his or her peer had difficulties in writing. The students were encouraged to raise questions and to help each other improve the content and the organization of the paragraphs rather than point out grammatical mistakes. To do so, they were advised to draw the attention of their partners indirectly by asking questions such as "What do you think about the tense?" In addition, a peer response worksheet was distributed to students, which included some questions about the content so the peer could discuss it with his or her partner. The questions were about the focus of the paragraph, logical arrangement of the ideas, and repetition of details.

Feedback by the instructor

To avoid discouragement, the feedback given by the instructor to the students was positive in general. The focus of the feedback was on strengths rather than weaknesses. Since multiple drafts were required, the comments of the first two were on content and organization. To clarify the content, specific questions were asked. For instance, "What do you mean?" or "Can you give an example?" were two common questions to help students not only to clarify their ideas but also to elaborate them.

An abbreviated worksheet of errors was given to students, which listed the different types of errors to help them understand my comments and to work independently correcting them. Abbreviations were used, for example, SVA meant subject-verb agreement and WC meant word choice.

To avoid inhibiting the students, grades were not given. The final draft was evaluated as "good+," "good," "fairly good," and so forth. In general, grading was cumulative. All of the student's work was included in calculating the final grade. For example, 50 percent of the final grade had been assigned to the 10 written paragraphs and essays, the portfolio was assigned 20 percent, and 30 percent was assigned to the journals and filling the worksheets.

Conclusion

Students reported in the portfolio that they enjoyed taking the course. In fact, they were delighted to confirm that they felt that the course improved all language skills because they had the chance to listen, speak, read, and write. Although they complained about the amount of reading, they commented positively on the stories selected. They also mentioned that they had improved their writing. When they were asked to compare between their first and last written assignments in terms of content, organization, and mechanics, they reported that they could see their progress.

Three student portfolios were analyzed to examine the effectiveness of such a demanding course and to evaluate the students' progress. The improvement in proficiency level was noticeable. By the end of the school year, the three students were able to write good five-paragraph essays differentiating between the different types of sentences such as the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and the thesis. In the same way, they were able to write proper introductory and concluding paragraphs as well as body of the text. Compared to their early written assignments, they succeeded in writing fewer fragments and run-on sentences. Also, the use of transitions and conjunctions improved.

When this course is taught again, I will make several improvements. Two hours a week was not sufficient time for such a demanding course. At least four hours should be assigned for teaching it effectively. More classroom practice is required for analyzing errors and helping the students organize their thoughts and structure their sentences. Also, guidelines for writing proper paragraphs and essays should be introduced early in the course. With these changes, this course will be even more effective in strengthening students' reading and writing skills.

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