

Effects of an Integrated Reading/Writing Approach on Improving Writing Skills of EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The importance of reading in developing writing ability has been established in prior research. Not only does reading give the writer a feel for the look at the reader-based prose but also the basis for writing. Therefore, the objective of this article is to explore the effects of reading on writing in an integrated fashion during the learning process of EFL learners learning writing in King Khalid University. The researcher used the quasi-instrumental approach to overcome the issue. The sample is all male students whose average age is of 20-22 years in the Department of English. In this research, ways of reading which are likely to promote the development of writing through integration of skills were sought for EFL reading instructions to answer the question: How can we help EFL learners develop their writing ability? The study concludes that integrated reading has a direct influence on the quality of writing as it gives positive effects on literacy development which helps students consider efficiently genre of writing in the learning process according to the percentages of t- test. T is equal to (9.100) in the level of (0.01) for reading as compared to (t) which is equal (7.417) in the same level for writing. This comparison shows an indication of improvement in the latter statistically.

Keywords: Learners, writing, development, skills, quasi-experiment.

INTRODUCTION

Older approaches adopted a trend in literacy pedagogy that dealt with reading and writing from the perspective that both skills were distinct and separate, with reading being considered the more elementary process of the two (McCormick, 1994; Nelson and Calfee, 1998). In the context of EFL in Saudi Arabia, the curriculum and pedagogy of writing and reading courses have traditionally been isolated, thus leading learners to have been discouraged to make connections between both skills. In the meanwhile, EFL instructors, too, have been unprepared to see these connections between these two related skills.

Of late, however, researchers and practitioners in the fields of ESL/EFL have recently recognised the importance of reading in developing writing and other language skills (Moffett, 1983; Scarella & Oxford, 1992; Carson and Leki, 1993; Tierney and Pearson, 1994;

Rosenblatt, 1994; Allred, 1994; Chamot, et al., 1999; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Flower and Hayes, 1994; Oxford, 2001; Tsung-Yuan & Oxford, 2002; Hirvela, 2004). Calls for advocating an integrated language teaching approach have been strongly voiced in relevant literature (Mekheimer, 2011). Very early, Krashen (1984) claims that "it is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose" (p.20). No wonder then that Carson and Leki (1993) have asserted that "reading can be, and in academic settings nearly always is, the basis for writing" (p.1).

In summing up research on the connections between the skills of reading and writing, Stotsky (1984) detected some consistent correlations, specifically that "better writers tend to be better readers", and that "better writers tend to read more than poorer writers," and finally, yet more importantly that "better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers" (p.16). Tierney and Leys (1986) concurred that "selective reading experiences definitely contribute to writing performance" (p. 25) while Salvatori (1996) argued that reading was seen as "an analogue for thinking about one's own and other's thinking, about how one's thinking is

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ignited by the thoughts of others," and this has a stimulant and procreative effect on students' writing (p. 446). By the same token, Petrosky (1982) could observe that writing significantly contributed to the development of reading skills and sub-skills, concluding that "the only way to demonstrate comprehension is through extended discourse where readers become writers who articulate their understandings of and connections to the text in their responses" (p. 24). In a similar vein, Vivian Zamel (1992) noted some "profound ways" in which writing induces to enhanced performance in reading, now that

"the process of writing shares much in common with the process of learning. [W]riting allows one to discover and consider one's stance, one's interpretation, one's immediate reactions to a text. [I]t makes these responses to text overt, concrete, and tangible" (p. 470).

In the meantime, McCormick (1994) revealed that when ESL/EFL learners are taught reading and writing skills as separate courses, these beneficial effects are lost. Students usually write essays that fundamentally digest a reading with some personal observations drawn from their reading; the two activities they typically find most difficult are "integrating one's own ideas and knowledge into the written conversation with one's sources" and "interpreting source texts for a purpose of one's own" (p. 99).

Modern researchers have acknowledged that reading has actually become the basis of writing because the information acquired through reading contains print-encoded messages as well as clues about how the messages' grammatical, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical constituents combine to make the message meaningful (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005, p.31). Pertinently, Hirvela (2004) argued that reading supports writing through "meaningful input". In this regard, meaningful input constitutes not only of facts, but specific components that build up the writing ability and metacognitive skills associated with it, such as thinking through and seeking to resolve the problems embedded in the writing process (Bolch and Chi, 1995).

In this regard, Hirvela (2004) contended that reading and writing abilities share various constructs such as rhetorical structure, linguistic features of writing, and examining lexical as well as stylistic characteristics of writing (p.115). A survey conducted by Tierney and Shanahan (1991) which synthetically analyzed large portions of correlational studies has indicated from 25% up to 50% overlap between reading and writing abilities.

The segregation of the skills is not consistent with the nature of language development in the first language context. In the first language context all language skills are interrelated. The interrelatedness of the language skills can be deduced from observation of a child's development of oral and written language which follows the sequence of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this vein, Strang (1972) noted this sequence:

Listening precedes speaking and reading. Children acquire their native tongue through listening to and imitating the speech of their parents. Speaking is basic to both reading and writing (p. 291).

The recognition of this sequential growth identifies the language skills as being interwoven and interdependent. It also suggests that a problem in one language skill will usually carry over to another skill, while proficiency in one skill facilitates development of another skill (Strang, 1972).

Modern empirical research (e.g. Heffernan, 2006; Al-Ghamari, 2004; Faydi, 2003; Bose, 2003) also indicated the significance of integrated skill presentation for improved language learning outcomes, especially the integration of writing skills with other language skills such as reading, listening, speaking and pronunciation.

More specifically, in teaching writing, research suggests that segregated skill teaching, the lack of authentic communication that typically exists in EFL contexts, and difficulties with sequencing teaching-learning activities combine to hinder the development of writing skills (Hao & Sivell, 2002). Relevantly, the theoretical work of Rosenblatt (1938, 1978, 1994), Moffett (1983), Flower and Hayes (1994), and Vygotsky (1986) and the pedagogical work of Atwell (1987) and Elbow (1986), and Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) assert reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking are all involved as readers and writers activate schema to create meaning from their own and others' texts. Reading and writing are not separate entities but parts in a communicative process.

Notwithstanding the claims and contentions in favour of the skeletal importance of reading to writing and to the rest of the language skills, no matter how significantly supported by empirical researches, common knowledge and applications suggest that it is not always the case that good readers develop into good writers. To clarify, particularly in the EFL context, the case of many students is that they often develop competent reading skills without developing their writing ability to a similar

degree. For instance, the 25% to 50% overlap between reading and writing abilities in Tierney and Shanahan's study (1991) referred to above indicates that there are developmental discrepancies between the two skills in terms of acquisition, application and manifestation. By the same token, Grabe (2001) suggested two important differences between reading and writing: namely – deliberateness and focus of reflection. While the main purpose of reading is to reflect on meaning, pondering over the whole of language is yet essential to the writing process to make sure that ideas are expressed in the appropriate fashion. Therefore, while reading and writing share some common ground and may complement and integrate one other, there are differences between the two abilities and reading ability does not always transfer to writing ability.

Implicit in reading practices, are differences depending on our purpose of reading and reading tasks involved. The two main differences between reading and writing which have already been explained in Grabe (2001) can be found in the most common method of reading, i.e., reading for comprehension. Some other methods and techniques of reading may bear the characteristics which are missing in reading for comprehension but are yet principal to the writing process. In this respect, Hayes (1996) compared reading for revision with reading for comprehension, suggesting that when people read tend to revise, writers pay rapt attention to language forms and writing mechanics for the problems and effectiveness. However, reading for revision occurs in the process of text production. Therefore, readers are forced to see the text from a writer's perspective. Hence arises the classical debate of accuracy versus fluency. If readers pay too much attention to accuracy in oral production (reading/speaking), they would sacrifice fluency, while they would do the same to accuracy if they pay more attention to fluency at the cost of accuracy.

However, anticipating writing output may itself shift the reader's attention towards important input for their own output (Yoshimura, 2006). In this regard, researchers have claimed the importance of mining; this term was advocated by Greene (1993) to refer to the reader's shift in attention towards useful input for their writing. According to Greene (1993), mining is "part of an ongoing effort to learn specific rhetorical and linguistics conventions" from reading and make them "their own repertoire for writing on different occasions" (p.36).

Thus, reading behaviour and what can be learned from reading may change depending on the characteristics of a specific reading task, and some ways of reading have characteristics which tend to be missing in reading for comprehension but which are important in writing. If these characteristics are integrated and implemented in reading instruction, then learners may learn important input for their writing.

The Present Study

Prior research on ESL/EFL language ability development called for an integrated approach to teaching these language abilities, especially connecting reading to writing (Lynch, 1983; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1994; Allred, 1994; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Flower and Hayes, 1994; Oxford, 2001). Nevertheless, in the Arabic-speaker context, there is little empirical evidence supporting the claimed benefits of an integrated approach to language instruction.

Early research findings (e.g. Loban, 1963; Ruddell, 1966; Thomas, 1974) indicate that a student's ability to use listening and speaking skills is closely related to the learner's ability to comprehend written language, and further deploy these skills to reading comprehension. Furthermore, recent literature on the topic (Hefferman, 2006; Faydi, 2003) recommends integrated skill instruction to ameliorate language learning outcomes, especially in relating reading to writing.

In this vein, researchers (See for instance, Hinkel, 2006; Shanahan, 2006) have come to the conclusion that the four skill areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing should not be instructionally approached as distinct and isolated cognitive domains – rather, they need to be presented integrately in each and every learning/teaching task or activity. This study, however, has sought to explore the effects of integrated reading and writing skills on the latter ability.

Research Methodology

Design

Effects of connecting reading and writing and effects of the former on the latter were explored by conducting a quasi-experiment. The quasi-experimental design was used in this research because it uses "situations which already exist in the real world and are probably more representative of the conditions found in educational contexts" (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989, p.148). The two groups consisted of already existing two writing classes.

One group would serve as the experimental group and the other group would serve as the control group.

Setting

The study was carried out in King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. The participants were all juniors in their second semester of the academic year 2011. The population of the study was all male (averagely aged 20-22 years) because co-education is prohibited in university education in Saudi Arabia for religious and cultural purposes.

Participants

The present study explored the performance of two groups of students. The experimental group (n = 27 students) was taught the reading and writing skills in an integrated approach of instruction. The control group (n = 25 students) completed the same courses with no particular emphasis on these two skills integration. The two groups were actually two sections assigned to one teacher who was teaching Writing III and Reading III, to the same level of EFL college students at the College of Languages and Translation, Abha, King Khalid University. The instructor was selected for this instructional job in this study only to avoid instructor-related variables, if two different teachers were employed for teaching according to this approach in the experimental class.

Procedures

The prescribed course book for teaching language skills, namely the Tapestry series, has never been taught the way it was meant to be taught – i.e., through the integration of the skills. So the innovation purported for the present study was to teach both reading and writing in a connected way to the experimental group with more emphasis on using reading for developing writing, through the integration of these skills and then gauge its effectiveness. In order to achieve this, the instructor and the researcher discussed how to achieve this and at the same time follow the term-work course plans to be followed by all the instructors uniformly. This needed a trimming of the actual course plans for all the skills in such a way so as not to affect the overall performance of the students who were supposed to take a unified end of term exam. Trimming was needed to include the activities which were previously left out of the course plans for all skills. For example in the Writing Skill, many of the

reading activities which were conducive to writing in a specific genre, say narrating an incident from childhood, were left out in order to save time and include more writing activities. After a thorough discussion, it was decided to include most of the activities left out in order to achieve the integration of skills. The problem was managing the classroom time and following the general course plans. For that, the instructor and I decided to give more homework to the experimental group, whereas the control group participants were given normal assignments usually taken during coursework. Moreover, we also decided to speed up some classroom activities in order to gain time for doing the extra work during the class time.

Instruments of the Study

This integrated approach utilised two models of skills integration: content-based instruction and task-based instruction; specifically, the integrated teaching approach sought to integrate learning subject content with learning of a language and, therefore, it organised the skills around the communicative tasks learners needed to engage in and outside of the classroom. In this way, the focus was not only the form of the language, but also the functional purposes for which language may be used in real-life situations. Moreover, classroom activities and learning modules used were geared to incorporate more than just one communication skill. For example, writing assignments were not limited to writing, but rather included prewriting activities which were connected to the reading ability and its sub-skills.

The course ran continually for 16 weeks. During the first week, pre-tests were conducted in the two skills for both the control and experiment groups. At the end of the semester, both the control and experiment groups took post-experiment tests in the reading and writing skills. The tests were evaluated by the same teacher who marked the pre-tests and the results constituted the empirical data to be compared with the pre-test.

Pre-tests and Post-tests

Students from both groups were administered a pre-test and a post-test in both skills. Both the written and reading tests ran for 60 minutes each. The writing skill tests included questions on writing sentences, writing a paragraph and editing. The reading skill tests included a cloze test, literal and interpretive comprehension and making inferences.

T-tests and gain scores were used to compare students' performance in all skills in both the experimental and control groups. Improvement (or gain in achievement or skill acquisition and development) from pretest to posttest can be computed for each participant by subtracting each person's pretest score from his or her posttest score (Gain score = posttest – pretest). The gain score controls for individual differences in pretest scores by measuring the posttest score relative to the each person's pretest score.

Hypotheses

This study was designed to test the following null hypotheses ($p \leq 0.01$):

- 1) There are no statistically significant differences between the mean scores of students in reading and writing in the experimental and control groups on pretesting (to ensure group equivalence).
- 2) There are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of language skills of students who completed the integrated Tapestry courses in Reading

& Comprehension and Writing III according to an integrated approach and the mean scores of the students who participated in the same courses with no systematic integration on post-testing in favour of post-treatment.

- 3) There are statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control students in their gain scores in all skills in favour of post-treatment.

RESULTS

Data for analysis were collected from pretesting and posttesting, having been processed by through t-tests, run by the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS), version 14.

Hypothesis I: Group Equivalence

To test the first null hypothesis in order to make sure that they began the experiment at comparatively similar levels of skills, a t-test was computed to reassure group equivalence; the obtained t-values and their significance levels are shown in (Table 1) below.

**Table (1)
Group Equivalence as Measured by All Skills Pretesting**

Skills	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.
Reading	experimental	29	22.3333	.73598	0.0534	0.955
	control	33	22.3226	.74776		
Writing	experimental	29	25.4242	1.34699	0.0131	0.901
	control	33	25.4194	1.40888		

The table above demonstrates that there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups on pre-assessment. In this way, the first hypothesis was verified, and group equivalence was confirmed.

Hypothesis II: Pre/Post-treatment Comparisons

The data presented in (Table 2) show an improvement on pretest/posttest comparisons for both skills; as the t-values indicate, there is a significant difference between experimental and control students ($p = 0.01$) in favour of the experimental class in both reading and writing abilities following exposure to integrated skills instruction. Thus, the second hypothesis is verified.

**Table (2)
Pretesting/Posttesting Comparisons of Experimental and Control Participants' Performances**

Skills	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.
Reading	experimental	29	69.0909	.72300	11.963	0.01
	control	33	66.7742	.66881		
Writing	experimental	29	84.9394	1.22320	8.837	0.01
	control	33	78.3871	3.63939		

Based on the results in the above table, the hypothesis stating that there are significant differences between both research groups on all skills in favour of the treatment group has been verified as well; this finding is commensurate with prior research findings indicating that integrated skills teaching is effective in improving language skills improvement (O'Day, 2002; Flora, 1995; King, 1996; Lynch, 1983; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992;

Rosenblatt, 1994; Allred, 1994; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Flower and Hayes, 1994; Oxford, 2001).

Hypothesis III: Gains in Skill Development

For differences in performance over time between the two groups, the researcher employed gain scores and the independent samples t-test to assess the effect of the treatment on all skills.

Table (3)
Findings of t-test between Experimental and Control Participants in Gain Scores

Skills	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig.
Reading	experimental	29	46.7576	1.17341	7.417	0.01
	control	33	44.4516	1.05952		
Writing	experimental	29	59.5152	1.32574	9.100	0.01
	control	33	52.9677	3.47835		

The statistical analysis in (Table 3) above points to a significant increase ($p < .01$) in the experimental group's gain scores in comparison with those of the control group. Therefore, the third hypothesis indicating an improvement in gains between experimental participants and control participants was confirmed.

DISCUSSION

Gained performance of the experimental group participants in both writing and in reading comprehension may be attributed to the emphasis placed on presenting the writing skills in integration with other skills and sub skills of both reading and writing abilities. These results emphasise the importance of connecting reading and writing. The experimental reading course was instructionally designed to provide ample time and integration for instructional activities in the various areas of writing skills while approaching these skills in an integrated manner when teaching writing. This finding is consistent with other observations and research findings of some authors and critics (e.g., Oxford, 2001; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; King, 1996; Landberg, 1993; Laine, 1997; Allred, 1994; Flora, 1997; O'Day, 2002; Hefferman, 2006). The results of this study demonstrate these views. The experimental students, who were found to be deficient in writing skills before the initiation of the study, were able to develop both their reading and writing skills. As has been earlier noted, reading before writing may have helped students to brush up on these skills and the linguistic as well as their real world knowledge of the

students which eventually helped in the overall development of their writing skills.

Conclusions of the Study

Crudely put, writing ability, which is more demanding than other language skills, developed more in the experimental treatment group than the control group because integrated reading and writing skills teaching helped and supported overall language development for communicative purposes – e.g. the integrated instruction in vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, which contributed to induced language development by helping learners to use vocabulary effectively in context, use ideas from reading and listening texts, etc. The use of authentic communication, sequenced teaching-learning activities tasks integrating all skills equally, use of content-based material especially in reading before writing, classroom and peer discussions, the use of writing and reading journals, and the use of student recordings as well as supplementary cassette and video segments accompanying the course all contributed to the improvement of skills in the experimental group participants. This integrated language skills approach supports Breen and Candlin's views on the issue of inter-relatedness of skills development and curriculum purposes. "Just as no single communication ability can develop independently of other abilities, so the development of one skill may well depend on the appropriate development of other skills ... just as a refinement of the skill of reading, for example, will

contribute to the development of speaking and vice-versa.” (Breen & Candlin, p 15). This confirms previous research findings and extrapolations in relevant literature on the topic of integrated skills teaching in foreign/second language teaching (Sehlaoui, 2001; Hao & Sivell, 2002; Heffernan, 2006; Al-Ghamari, 2004; Oxford, 2001; Faydi, 2003; Bose, 2003).

The philosophy that underpins integrated skills teaching is also reflected in the ideas in Graves (2001, p 184) discussion of a ‘four-skills based approach to syllabus design’ to build the proficiency level of the learners. This according to him can be best achieved by teachers who ‘find ways to integrate them’. The present study was a step in this direction and demonstrated that the students proficiency level in the experimental group improved significantly by the innovative use of skills integration.

Tacitly, it could be deduced that the utilization of integrated skills teaching can enhance students’ overall language proficiency in the skills of reading and writing, especially the latter, which makes this research a valuable reference document for EFL teaching and assessment at King Khalid University. It may influence some policy decision in favour of a shift towards teaching language skills in an integrated way. It should logically lead to a detailed reassessment of the term-work course study programmes of each skill. More integrative skills activities may be included in order to utilise the Tapestry series full potential. Furthermore, besides the factors that brought beneficial results in this study, the researcher would deduce that the reading and writing books separately and independently had something like integrated skills portions of exercises, but they were not strongly emphasized to give teachers the green light to adopt an integration approach *per se*. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) state that “while the research indicates that reading can lead to improved writing skills, there is no evidence that this improvement is automatic” (p. 122). They continue by saying that “to improve their writing ability, students must do something with the reading” (p. 122). There is a lot of room for instructors to think of what they can do for students to improve their skills for

future work, but it is certain that synergetic effects can be expected with the integration of reading and writing skills.

Limitations and Implications of the Study

This research has various limitations and the following points which need to be considered in interpreting the results and generalizing them:

- 1) The sample size is rather small, which should be considered in the generalization of the research results.
- 2) Greater impact of connecting reading and writing rather than the impact of the instruments and tools or the instructor’s abilities was found. Therefore, to be exposed to such an instructional type of text of the Tapestry series may in itself have helped students’ learn more about integrating writing with other skills, importantly reading.
- 3) As Smagorinsky (1992) says, it takes time and practice to learn. The effects of the teaching approach need to be measured by a delayed post-test after sufficient practice is given. In this research, a delayed post-test was not conducted. However, the use of gain scores and post-assessments may have circumvented this defect as verified in the third hypothesis which was confirmed statistically.
- 4) What to include in the teaching material and assessment measures was decided by integrating findings from reading and writing research and the results of the present study. The validity of the choice, however, has not been fully examined. Studies with different items need to be conducted to further investigate the validity and reliability of the tools and measures.
- 5) Writing performance was measured by evaluation criteria created by the author. Again, the validity of the criteria needs to be examined further.

Despite the numerous limitations, this study empirically demonstrated significant effects of connecting reading and writing; in fact, despite limited generalisability, beneficial effects of the integrated approach to teaching reading and writing were yet detected as to the improvements on EFL learners’ learning about English writing.

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أثر التكامل بين القراءة والكتابة في تحسين مهارات الكتابة لدى دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث أهمية القراءة والكتابة المتكاملة في تطوير مهارة الكتابة الذي طالما تحدثت عنه أبحاث سابقة. إن القراءة المتكاملة مع الكتابة ليست مهمة فقط لمنح القارئ إحساساً بمحتوى النثر. وإنما هي مهمة لتنمية الكتابة؛ لذا، يستهدف هذا البحث بيان أثر القراءة المتكاملة في الكتابة بشكل متكامل أثناء قيام طلبة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في أداء مهارة الكتابة في كلية اللغات والترجمة في جامعة الملك خالد في المملكة العربية السعودية. ولتحقيق أهداف البحث، استخدم الباحث المنهج شبه التجريبي، بحيث تكونت عينة الدراسة من مجموعة من الطلبة الذكور تتراوح أعمارهم بين 20-22 سنة ممن يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. وقد أخذ الباحث في الحسبان طرق القراءة من خلال ممارسة الطلبة لمهارات القراءة والكتابة المتكاملة لتطوير مهاراتهم الكتابية وذلك للإجابة على السؤال الرئيس: كيف تساعد درسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أن يطوروا قدراتهم الكتابية؟ وقد خلصت الدراسة إلى أن القراءة المتكاملة مع الكتابة لها تأثير مباشر في نوعية ودرجة تحسين مهارة الكتابة؛ لأنها أعطت نتائج إيجابية في تطوير عملية التعلم من خلال عرض نتائج مقارنة بين القياس القبلي والقياس البعدي على اختبارات تحصيلية في المهارتين باستخدام اختبار النسبة التائية؛ حيث كانت قيمة (ت) تساوي 9.100 عند مستوى دلالة 0.01 للقراءة وقيمة (ت) تساوي 7.417 عند مستوى دلالة 0.01 للكتابة، بما يفيد تحسن أداء العينة في الكتابة مقارنة بالقراءة لدى المجموعة التجريبية التي درست وفق المدخل التكامل للمهارتين.

الكلمات الدالة: متعلمون، الكتابة، تطوير، مهارات، منهج شبه تجريبي.

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