

USING READINGS IN THE WRITING CLASS

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The use of readings in the writing class is another topic that has generated a great deal of debate among those searching for methodologies which promote improvement in writing proficiency. Before awareness of how to address the writing process in class and of the importance to students of actually doing writing in class, the primary activity of so-called writing classes was actually reading. As mentioned earlier, the traditional paradigm for L1 writing classes was rooted in having students read and discuss texts which they would then go on to write about.

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When the process approach was first introduced, many writing instructors eliminated the use of readers, and used only texts written by the students themselves as the reading material for the course. The dominant philosophy seemed to be that one learns to write by writing, and that perhaps reading had very little to do with the acquisition of writing. ESL teachers following the developments in L1 writing classrooms also went through a period in which reading played almost no role in the writing classroom. But the pendulum has begun to swing in the opposite direction, and while readings have been reintroduced into the so-called modern process writing class-- both L1 and L2--the nature of the readings and their function is viewed quite differently.

On one level, readings serve some very practical purposes in the writing class, particularly for ESL writers who have less fluency in the language. At the very least, readings provide models of what English texts look like, and even if not used for the purpose of imitation where students are asked to produce an English text to match the style of the model text, readings provide input which helps students develop awareness of English prose style. Krashen makes the case even stronger by claiming, "It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose." [1.56]

Those who argue in favor of reading in the writing classroom claim that reading inspires students, introducing them to great ideas and improving their ability to think critically and analytically. Moreover, reading centers class discussion, giving students something to talk about beyond their own personal experiences.

In class, close reading exercises can be done to draw students' attention to particular stylistic choices, grammatical features, methods of development, and so on. Such exercises help to raise student awareness of the choices writers make and

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the consequences of those choices for the achievement of their communicative goals. Spack points out, "An active exploration of the writer/reader interaction can lead students to realize and internalize the idea that what they write becomes another person's reading and must therefore anticipate a reader's needs and meet a reader's expectations." [2.118] On another level, writing tasks assigned by many professors require students to do a great deal of reading in order to synthesize and analyze academic material in particular content areas. Thus, the EFL writing class can incorporate lessons which assist students in preparing academic writing assignments by using readings as a basis to practice such skills as summarizing, paraphrasing, interpreting, and synthesizing concepts.

In order to help EFL learners become more effective writers, we need to make a crucial distinction between language accuracy and writing skills. That is, a learner may be able to write sentences which are satisfactory for his/her level in terms of grammar, syntax and vocabulary and still be unable to produce an effective text. Of course, in most cases learners will have problems in both areas (language and writing skills). Therefore, it is crucial for us to be able to look beneath the layer of language problems to discover writing problems. This leads us to another important distinction, the one between grammar/vocabulary development and writing skills development. We need to remember that language input/practice alone cannot result in the development of writing skills. Special activities in writing lessons are necessary, in which learners are guided to become aware of all the elements of good writing, supported with information and examples, provided with opportunities for practice, and given focused feedback on their performance. We can also plan lessons which integrate work on language with work on writing skills. In such cases, it is important for us to be clear about the aims/focus of different stages in the lesson. In order to be able to select and use appropriate procedures and materials, as well as assess their learners needs and progress, teachers need to be clear regarding the desirable outcomes of a writing programme and the processes involved in good writing.

Finally, many EFL students are not highly skilled readers, having had limited opportunities to read extensively in English; it is highly unlikely that anyone who is a nonproficient reader can develop into a highly proficient writer. For that reason alone, EFL teachers are well advised to include a reading component of one nature or another in their classes.

In conclusion, if teachers are eager to be more creative and innovative, they can find various activities to improve writing skills but they should take into consideration the following facts:

- 1) to create tasks in accordance with students level of English and interest
- 2) to teach writing starting from skill building exercises to process based
- 3) to get started form pre-writing techniques to proof reading
- 4) to let students do peer checking
- 5) to combine reading and writing tasks
- 6) to use techniques mentioned above

It has been the major aim of our research work to emphasize the fact that teaching writing skills is particularly important at the initial stage of language learning since it helps students establish a good basis in learning other skills such as reading, speaking and listening.

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