

Theories, Practices, Challenges, and the New Tendency in Connecting Reading and Writing

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Abstract

Since the 21st century, the similarity views of reading and writing started an ever-lasting enthusiasm for connecting reading and writing. The present paper reviewed the studies in the recent 20 years and categorized them into the following four aspects. First, theoretical investigations were mainly concerned with the dynamic relationships between reading and writing and the cultivation of critical thinking in the connection process. Secondly, contextualized practices from foreign language teachers gave adequate evidence of the possibility and necessity of the integration. Thirdly, in the integration task, various challenges were faced by both the language teachers and the students. Finally, in the digital age, the Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) inevitably started a new tendency.

Key words: Reading and writing; Theories; Practices; Challenges; New tendency

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INTRODUCTION

The importance and necessity of integrating reading and writing have always been the research interest of language

teachers and second language acquisition researchers. Discussions upon the relationships between reading and writing haven taken three basic approaches: rhetorical relations, procedural connections, and shared knowledge (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). The first two approaches have been talking about the concrete connections, while the third one is based on the premise that reading and writing are constellations of cognitive processes that depend on knowledge representations at various linguistic levels. The approach of shared knowledge suggests that reading and writing are in effect connected, because they depend on identical or similar knowledge representations, cognitive processes, and contexts and contextual constraints. Thus, we should expect reading and writing to be quite similar, their developments should parallel each other closely, and to make language learning more efficient, some type of pedagogical combination may be useful (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). The similarity assumption between reading and writing and hence the connection between them have been accepted by most scholars. The similarities between reading and writing are elaborated as the following: both of them are “acts of composing” and have “recursive processes” (Hirvela, 2001), that is, the reader is akin to a writer, because the reader is not “the passive consumer of a finished product”, but a “collaborator in the process of text production and therefore also an active producer of meanings” (Littau, 2006, p.35). The similarity views of reading and writing started an ever-lasting enthusiasm from the researchers for the connections between reading and writing.

1. THEORETICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF READING-WRITING CONNECTIONS

1.1 The Dynamic Relationship Between Reading and Writing

The relationship between reading and writing, to some other researchers, even goes beyond similarity

to sameness. They think that reading and writing are equivalents and thus there is no distinction between them. This is because reading is “really writing” (actively creating meaning), and writing is “really reading” (passively finding what culture and history have inscribed in our heads) (Berninger, 2002). This view also finds supporters like Keller, who claims that “reading and writing need to be understood as literacy counterparts; we cannot fully understand one without the other” (2014, p.36). Based on this view, while we are reading something, we are actively creating a new piece of material orally in our mind, and while we are writing something, we are engaging all our previous knowledge by reading our mind picture first. But we know oral language is different from written language and there is still a gap between our “oral composition” and our “written composition”. Thus, the same piece of reading is quite possibly given different comprehensions by different readers. This view highlights the negotiation of meaning in the textual interactions between reader and writer, and vice versa.

This view seems to suggest that reading and writing should not be separated and therefore there is no necessity to teach reading and writing as two separate courses. However, in most classroom instructions of second language acquisition, to give fair attention to the importance of both sides, reading and writing are taught separately. It seems that the educators were afraid that if not teaching reading and writing in separate courses, the teacher’s preference for one aspect may result in the negligence of the other. Though the processing mental work of both reading and writing may be similar or the same, the amount of time we spend on either of them does not lead to the spontaneous development of the other accordingly. This is why reading and writing, particularly in second language acquisition classrooms, have always been taught separately.

However, researchers’ passion for their fluid, cooperative relationship has never been reduced. Recent studies shifted to take language learner differences into consideration and thus had a new finding of a developmental relationship. Results showed that the relationship between reading and writing was not static but dynamic if both the situation and the language proficiency of the learners were considered. Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000) attempted a very preliminary description of a developmental perspective on the relation of reading and writing, because as reading and writing are learned, the nature of their relation changes. The results confirmed their assumptions. Williams (2006) gave a summary of the role of writing in the process of language learning, suggesting that “writing may aid in the development of language proficiency at two possible points” (p.14): The first point comes soon after the initial point of acquisition, as learners try out new and more complex forms of familiar forms in new contexts, and the second point comes considerably later in the process, that is, as they

access acquired forms over which they do not yet have full control, as part of their automatization.

1.2 Critical Thinking in Reading and Writing

Though the complex relationships between reading and writing were provided, the benefit of integrating reading into writing cannot be more revealed than in its cultivation for critical thinking (Cavdar & Doe, 2012; Gao, 2013; Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2009), for it was generally agreed that reading widely can improve the learners’ writing abilities, and at the higher level of reading comprehension and in the process of writing, the logical thinking abilities will be enhanced. Critical thinking abilities include the abilities to organize “structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning” (Weissberg, 2013) or the abilities to find out the problems and then to provide the solutions (Saxton et al, 2012). All the values and competencies of critical thinking were socially constructed and highly situated within different disciplines (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004), and meaning construction, the link between reading and writing, was the result of critical thinking (Gebhard et al, 2013).

Critical reading and writing are currently the urgent concern of most colleges, which propels the creative colleges to combine the components into a unified course addressing both skill gaps (DuBrowa, 2011). To test the relationship of creative thinking to reading and writing, Wang (2012) designed a questionnaire and a creativity test. Result based on the 196 students showed that creativity scores, especially scores of elaboration, were significantly correlated with the students’ attitudes towards reading/writing, and the amount of time spent on reading/writing. The pedagogical suggestion to the teachers is to ask the students to read and write more.

However, the integration of reading and writing is not only a language activity, but also a complex mental process, in which various factors are involved. From reading to writing, the reader/writer goes at least the following mental processes: (Reading) decoding-understanding-restoring-stimulating-recoding-producing (Writing) (Li, 2012). In every stage, the knowledge of language at different levels (sounds, spelling, meaning, grammar, pragmatic knowledge) would play a crucial role. Reading itself is not adequate for writing well, but understanding of the reading material and restoration of the knowledge and the further activation of the restored information is much more important. In other words, input does not equal to intake, and to achieve the stage of intake, the reader’s conscious attention to the input is necessary (Truscott & Smith, 2011). Therefore different reading strategies need to be proposed to help language learners to activate their comprehension of the reading materials so as to produce successful writing pieces.

Psycholinguistic variables also account for the different levels of language comprehension/production processing. To test the effect of psycholinguistic factors

upon the complex mental process, Parodi (2007) designed four tests on 439 eighth graders. Results showed that there were significant coefficients between reading and writing of argumentative texts in all the psycholinguistic levels.

Therefore, to integrate reading and writing, we need to take many factors into consideration. The language learners' mental activities, psychological levels, as well as their language proficiency are all the elements we should consider. Besides, the students' individualities like their personality, interest, and emotion are also the important factors that would also influence the result of the reading-to-write task. As Crossley et al (2017) claimed, there are a multitude of factors, both within text and within individuals that influence text comprehension and one linguistic aspect of text.

2. PRACTICES IN CONNECTING READING AND WRITING

Realizing the benefits of connecting reading and writing, then how to combine the two skills pedagogically aroused most teachers' interest. Though different definitions were given to the process of connecting reading and writing, the teaching methods were collectively called the task-based writing, which were efficient ways in improving the fluency of students' writing (Zhou & Siriyothin, 2010).

From the perspective of teaching academic writing, Hum (2015) realized that reading is a prerequisite for good academic writing and Cumming (2006) also suggested using reading as an activity for writing improvement, especially "to learn discipline-specific vocabulary" (p.162). English-novel-reading-based instructions were proved to be effective in helping the students out of their writing difficulty (He, 2013). Furthermore, second language teachers' own experience in reading novels also influenced their attitudes towards their adoption of the English-novel-reading-based method and the consequential classroom teaching effect (He, 2015). The pedagogical implications for the English teachers are obvious: If the teachers have a firm belief of this approach and if conditions permitted, the traditional English-textbook-based language teaching can be partially replaced by the English-novel-reading-based classroom instruction.

To connect reading and writing, the importance of source texts cannot be neglected. Two aspects of the role of source texts in writing have been revealed, one is knowledge telling and another is knowledge transforming (Cumming, 2013; Hirvela & Du, 2013). And it is more generated into the following statements that reading-writing task requires students to select, organize and connect content from source texts as they compose their own new texts (Rachel, 2004), or reading helps the EFL learners' development of their writing with the stimulus, structure, vocabulary, and prior experience (Shen, 2009).

In second or foreign language teaching classrooms, the integration of reading into writing can also find its application in the language tests. Reading-to-write, a term taken from language testing studies, in contrast to writing-only, proved to be one of the options (Plakans, 2008; Plakans & Gebril, 2012; Plakans & Gebril, 2013). The basic procedure of this model was that the students should first read some materials of the target language, then find out the significant points, and finally state their opinions in the writing form from one perspective (Zhang, 2009). This model can be best used in the intensive reading class (Li, 2014).

Contextualizing the language learning situation as well as the language proficiency of the learners, Wang Chuming and others conducted a series of researches on the L2 university students in China to delve deep into the effects of the "continuation task" in facilitating L2 learning and use. This task was, in effect, the writing activity after reading. Wang et al (2000) reported on a one-semester-long experiment on improving Chinese-speaking EFL learners' English by means of composition writing. The subjects consisted of 201 English majors in their first year of study at Guangdong Foreign Studies University. Among the four criteria (length, organization, ideas and language), they emphasized length. Results showed that the method of "writing long essays" was welcomed by most of the students. Wang Chuming (2012) shifted its direction to combining reading and writing in language teaching, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of this continuation task, with imitation as its focus. Wang & Yuan (2013) further confirmed that this task could be used in language proficiency tests. Then Wang & Wang (2014) discussed the special effect of alignment in the continuous task. By using the think-aloud method, Wang (2015) reported on a qualitative study looking into the L2 learning mechanism of the continuation task.

Wang (2016, 2017) moved from write-to-learn to the recent theory of CEC (completion, extension and creation). The argument affords a new perspective for probing the language learning process and its underlying mechanism, and for enhancing efficiency in improving language instruction and learning. The key elements in his CEC theory ask for the cooperation of reading comprehension and writing, and emphasize the facilitative or even the decisive role of the specific means of writing in language acquisition.

3. CHALLENGES FACED IN THE INTEGRATION TASK

Nowadays connecting reading and writing in our classroom is found to be facing many challenges. Based on a study which involved participants who were featured at a professional development event of the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE),

Patrick et al (2016) found that time management was the top ranking challenge for teaching Integrated Reading and Writing followed by balancing the instruction's focus and finding the proper curriculum materials.

However, the process of reading, unlike writing, was largely "invisible" (Carillo, 2015, p.126), so how to teach the students to successfully transfer the reading skills into writing remained a challenge. Thus writing from sources proved to be a complex process. Cumming et al (2016), based on 69 articles from 1993 to 2013, produced the following findings:

- (a) Students experience difficulties with, but develop certain strategies to deal with, the complex processes of writing from sources.
- (b) Knowledge and experience influence students' performance in writing from sources.
- (c) Differences may appear between L1 and L2 students in their understanding as users of sources in writing.
- (d) Performance in writing from sources varies by task conditions and types of texts written and read.
- (e) Instruction can help students improve their uses of sources in their writing.

The challenges can also be the challenging literacy tasks the students expected from the instructors, which combined reading and writing abilities (Grabe, 2001). Cohesion, one linguistic aspect of text, was a challenging task for advanced language learners. Crossley et al (2017) examined the effects of attended determiners used and writing quality. The findings demonstrated that the use of unattended demonstratives as anaphoric references was disadvantageous to both reading time and referent identification. However, these disadvantages became advantages in terms of essay quality likely because linguistic complexity was a strong indicator of high proficiency writing.

Citing from sources and plagiarism are sometimes difficult to distinguish, which form another challenge to language learners. When the connection between source text and written text emerges in the expected way, it is called citation, but when the conventions are not adhered to, it is called plagiarism (Pecorari, 2001, p. 229). It is more convenient for the students to copy both the language and the ideas from the source texts directly by using the computer. The implication for language teaching is task design in connecting reading and writing should be more careful so as not to force the students to commit "inadvertent plagiarism" (ibid. 243). In other words, the writing tasks should be meaningful so that the students do not feel "they are engaged in empty or unproductive tasks" (Bloch, 2001a, p.226). However, because of cultural differences, sometimes it is necessary to teach the students the strategies of how to cite from source texts to meet the academic expectations without being punished for plagiarism (Barks, 2001).

Propelled by these challenges, we language teachers and researchers should not take it for granted that if we

ask our students to write after reading, their language proficiency would be promoted. According to the students' levels, different tasks should be designed. University students should be treated differently from the beginners. Even within the same class, individual characteristics are still obvious. Each student is on his/her way of constructing the knowledge or thought. Thus, leaving space to the students so that they can follow their own track of development would be a wise decision.

4. NEW TENDENCY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The students in the technical generation are engaged in the complex work of assessing forms of digital, multimedia, and performed writing. Writing in this new age is better defined as "a technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media" with its highlights on the features of "epistemic, performative, multivocal, multimodal, and multimediated" (Lunsford, 2006, p.171). However, redefining terms is just one thing; realizing and fully implementing any such redefinitions is quite another. This is because "teaching writing based on a substantive redefinition of writing affects every single aspect of our work: our theories of writing, our curriculum, our classroom configurations, our staffing, training, evaluation principles and procedures, our relationships with other programs (and with upper administration), and our methods and materials" (ibid. 176).

With digitization coming to almost everyone's life, researches on reading and writing shifted to a new direction. However, findings show that reading and writing are more connected than ever in this new age (Warschauer et al, 2013): Students now have more opportunities to write about what they read; The increased amount of written interaction that young people participate in throughout the day also enhance their engagement with the reading of the texts; New digital text formats can help students understand the structure of English, and thus further benefit their writing. In this digital age, the boundary between reading and writing is becoming blurring, since "computers and web have profoundly influenced how we approach texts, shifting between the position of reader one moment and writer the next" (Keller, 2014, p.14). So, connecting reading and writing seems not to be a requirement but an already existing phenomenon.

Digitization is also regarded as an occasion to move from an epistemology of the eye to an epistemology of the hand. In the past, hand was regarded as one important body factor of sensing, moving, and feeling in the process of reading and writing, but now it is uniquely positioned to show what is at stake in the transition from pen and

pencil to keyboards, and from books and paper to tablets and screens (Mangen, 2016).

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) started another research field in this digital age. Bloch (2001b) endeavored to find out how computer program, like Common Space, affected reading and writing processes at the level of text construction and text processing. Findings suggest that during the process of technology implementation, researchers need to think about not only hardware and software but also “humanware”, that is, the introduction of the technology into the classroom should meet the language learners’ expectations regarding the benefits of the technology. Bloch (2006) provided further support to previous researches that students can use blogs to improve their classroom writing ability and to gain richer experience with literacy events.

Internet can be used as a context for reading, writing, and communication, with collaboration as the primary means of strategy exchange. Laurie et al (2012) designed one Internet Reciprocal Teaching to test the development of the students’ online reading comprehension, finding that peer collaboration helped those struggling readers become more active in coaching, leading, and sharing new strategies. To summarize the key points of one symposium on reading and writing in the digital times, Fulford et al (2016) emphasized the specific characteristics of collaboration in reading and writing in this new age: communication by email, coordinating time zones and connectivity to speak “in person” via Skype, which, according to them, gave shape to education in fundamental ways and should be of serious and unavoidable concern for educationists.

CONCLUSION

No matter what approach the scholars would use, and no matter what type of research they would adopt, the developmental relationship between reading and writing was accepted and hence the contextualized practices of integrating reading into writing poured into the research field. With the coming of a new era, the connection between reading and writing becomes even much closer. New explorations in this field will never be out of date. Therefore, what the language teachers and learners are confronted today is not whether to connect reading and writing but how to connect the two aspects in the new era.

As second language teachers, contextualizing the theories into concrete situations remain to be our unshakable responsibility. To emphasize their specific features or to make teaching convenient, we teach reading and writing separately. However, we English teachers should have a right comprehension of their innate relationship. What leaves to us is to find out the proper ways to implement the integration between reading and writing in our language classroom, taking the social

context of learning and the students’ language proficiency into consideration.

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