

Teaching Reading Through Writing : A Learning Strategy to Stimulate Literary Reading

Nadia Rezig, University of Biskra

Abstract

One of the main challenges that teachers of literature face in the foreign languages departments is developing within their students the will and the ability to evaluate literary texts. The challenge lies most of the time in the students' total indifference towards reading caused most of the time in their feeling unable to comprehend or evaluate the literary text. Writing and correcting others writings may help breaking that lack of confidence within our students.

Key words: Teaching reading with writing, learning strategies, literature reading, Foreign language learning.

ملخص

من بين أهم التحديات التي يواجهها أساتذة الأدب في أقسام اللغات الأجنبية هي تحفيز الطلبة على فهم وتقييم النص الأدبي ولكن يصعب الوصول إلى هذه الغاية أمام عدم إقبال الطلبة على اقتناء الكتب أو قراءتها بحجة عدم قدرتهم على الفهم . التخفيف من هذا العائق قد يكون ممكنا إذا عودنا الطلبة على الكتابة مع تصحيحهم لما يكتبه زملائهم من مقالات كتمرين لتقييم النصوص ورفع ثقتهم بقدراتهم.

Introduction:

Reading proficiency plays a great role in understanding a written statement accurately and efficiently. In many situations reading is considered to be the indispensable channel of communication in an ever widening world. In fact, we are living in a 'reading' world where it is difficult to manage without reading (1). Many foreign language learners do not conceive the importance of reading literature and the relationship between this skill benefits and their success in acquiring the foreign language. Teaching reading or stimulating students' eagerness to fetch and read books is not either an easy task. Sandra Schor advanced that one of the best ways to enhance students' motivation and willingness to read is through writing. She stated that the natural order in our schools has been to "teach" writing to youngsters but allow reading to "happen" informally. But she suggested that when we are in front of students who show no motivation for reading, the process has to be reversed (2).

The majority of foreign language learners can provide many excuses to their literature teacher for having not read the master piece of Joseph Conrad or James Joyce or any other English/American writer like the lack of time or most frequently, their inability to understand the writing even if the teacher explains to them that this is not an extra reading but a curriculum requirement. They know that the teacher will ultimately explain the plot or prepare and print for them a chapter or less of the book to work on. This absence of will and curiosity towards a book is a real problem and denotes a special academic "Laziness" that should be healed. The idea of Sandra Schor had been supported by many recent studies and the relationship between reading and writing had attracted many teachers.

In the present paper, we'll tackle the following points:

1. The collaborative learning benefits.
2. The reading process strategies
3. Causes of Comprehension failure.
4. The writing benefits
5. How can we use writing to teach reading?

1-The collaborative learning benefits.

According to Pr Toby Fulwiler, collaborative learning acknowledges that writing is a social as well as individual enterprise: writers collaborate when they brainstorm ideas, share writing in peer response groups, edit and proofread for each other, and publish. Fulwiler was a part of a writing group for more than a dozen years, and used collaborative learning techniques in his classes. He stated that small-group work, along with in-class writing, characterizes most of the classes he taught in both composition and literature. The idea then is to create an optimal context for a student who is

supposed to read hundreds of pages alone at home and at the same time break the major excuse that students advance which is their inability to comprehend what they have to read when the writer is a famous western figure. The fact that the student is producing a composition knowing that his class mate will evaluate it creates a will of impressing a corrector whose level is not that far from his.

On the other hand, being a corrector himself gives him confidence in his intellectual abilities. By teaching reading skills through the collaborative approach, we may be able to achieve the following objectives:

- a -Develop meaningful communication.
- b- Introduce task for communication to take place and the outcomes for the interaction
- c- Consider the learners as the center of attention.
- d- Active role of learners in the decision-making process.
- e -The learners interact with each other, help, and evaluate themselves in pairs/group work. (3)

2-The Reading Process Strategies:

Ziauddin Khand states that: Reading is a receptive language process. It is the process of recognition, interpretation and perception of written or printed materials.

However, the syllabus and teaching method in the educational institutions do not coordinate with the needs and the purpose of the learners.

- a- The existing text books are old, teacher-centered and less effective in learners' situation.
- b- The teaching method of the Universities is not learner-centered, so students' involvement in learning through question and discussion is negligible.
- c- Only oral lecture method is the dominating method in the universities where the role of learners is not that of active participants. (4)

The reading process takes its easiness/difficulty from the purpose it seeks to reach, whether:

-Reading to search information, to skim quickly, to learn from texts, to integrate information, to criticize a text or for general comprehension. The task of reading; whatever is its objective, involves cognitive, meta-cognitive and social/affective strategies as explained in the table below:

Table 1

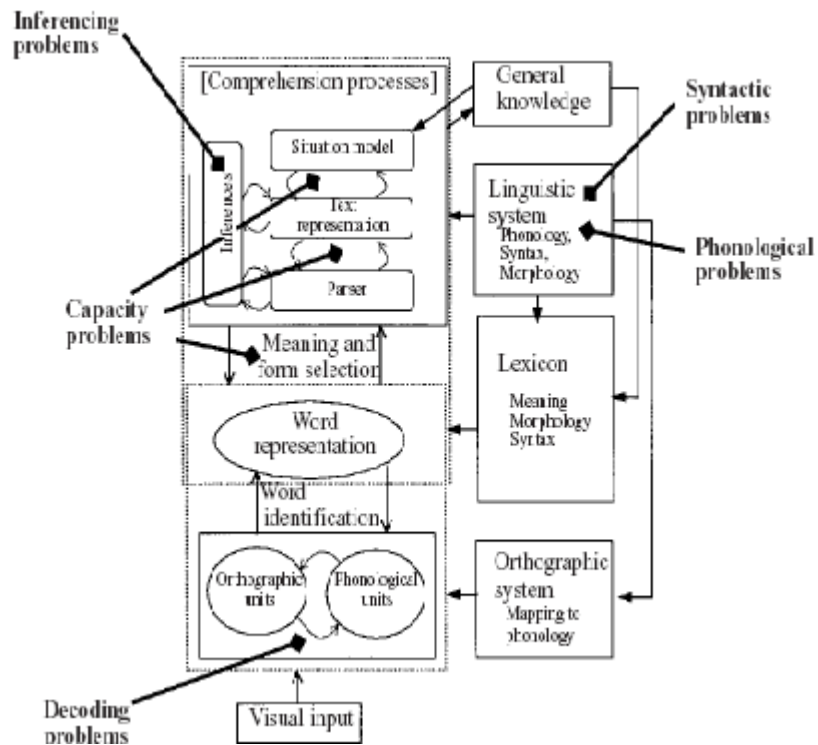
Table 12.1	
LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION	
Metacognitive Strategies:	Students plan, monitor, and evaluate their understanding of literature and development of writing skills.
Advance Organization	Can the title and chapter headings help me get a general idea of what this story is about?
Selective Attention	What are the most important parts of the story to pay attention to?
Organizational Planning	What's my purpose for reading, listening, speaking or writing? How should I organize my story, book report, or presentation? How do I begin and end? What's the best sequence of ideas or events? How can I describe and present the characters?
Self-monitoring	Am I understanding this? Does it make sense? Am I achieving my purpose? How is this task going? Do I need to make any changes right now?
Self-assessment	Did I understand this story or poem? What was the main point I got from reading or listening? How do I feel about the story and characters? What revisions are necessary in my writing? Do I need more information? Should I re-read?
Cognitive Strategies:	Students interact with literature and composition experiences, relating it to what they know and personalizing or organizing the material to understand and appreciate it.
Elaborating Prior Knowledge	What do I already know about this type of literature or writing? What experiences have I had that are related to this? How does this information relate to other things I know about literature or writing?
Taking Notes	What's the best way to write down what I need to remember? Outline? Chart? List? Diagram? Story map? Drawing?
Grouping	How can I classify the characters or events in this story? Can I organize this information graphically?
Making Inferences	What does this word or phrase probably mean? What clues can I use? What predictions can I make?
Summarizing	What's the most important information to remember about this story? Should my summary be oral, written, or mental?
Using Imagery	What can I learn from the illustrations, diagrams, and pictures in the text? Can I draw something to help me understand this story? Can I make a mental picture or visualize this event or place or characters?
Linguistic Transfer	Are there any words, prefixes, or suffixes that I recognize because of their similarity to my native language?
Social/Affective Strategies:	Students interact with peers, teachers, and other adults to assist learning, or use attitudes or feelings to assist learning.
Questioning for Clarification	Who should I ask for additional explanation or correction or suggestions? How should I ask?
Cooperating	How can I work with friends or classmates to understand this or complete this task or improve what I have written or presented orally?
Self-talk	Yes, I can do this. I just need the right strategies!

As shown in the table, reading literature is a process that generates a considerable mental effort from the part of the student which needs a big stimulus to be enhanced.

Charles A. Perfetti states that the reading processes depend on the language of the reader and the writing system that encodes that language. The units of the writing system are converted into mental representations that include the units of the language system. Specifically important are (a) the identification of words and (b) the engagement of language and general cognitive mechanisms that assemble these words into messages.

It is visual word identification that is the process most distinctive to reading. Beginning with a visual input—a string of letters—perceptual processes produce the activation of the *grapheme units* (individual and multiple letters) that constitute words. In traditional models of human cognition, the words are represented in a *lexicon*, the reader’s mental representation of word forms and meanings. Successful word reading occurs when there is a match between the input letter string and a word representation. Thus, he explains reading difficulty or the lack of motivation to read by what he qualifies reading problems in the following diagram (6):

A schematic view of reading processes with candidate sources of reading problems. Adapted from Perfetti (1999):



3- Causes of comprehension failure:

The ability to detect the appropriate meaning from words is central to the reading skill. At one level, this is a question of vocabulary. The more words a reader knows, the better the comprehension. At another level, it is the ability to select the right meaning of a word in a given context. Although the description of lexical meaning selection has become complex, a still widely (not universally) shared conclusion is this: the selection of word meaning proceeds in two-stages:

-(a) a general activation stage in which a word is accessed and its associated meanings non selectively activated, and (b) a selection stage in which the meaning appropriate for context is selected while meanings inappropriate for context are suppressed.

One hypothesis is that less skilled readers are less effective in selecting a contextually appropriate meaning. According to the structure building framework (Gernsbacher 1990), readers build a coherent framework for a text by enhancing concepts required by the text while suppressing those that are irrelevant. The suppression hypothesis is that less skilled readers have deficient suppression mechanisms. To illustrate, in the sentence, 'He dug with the spade,' the final word has two meanings, but only one fits the context of the sentence. However, when adult readers are immediately asked to decide whether a following word is related to the meaning of the sentence, their decisions are initially slow for the word 'ace' (related to the inappropriate meaning of spade). Both appropriate and inappropriate meanings may be activated at first. With more time before the appearance of 'ace,' skilled readers show no delay in rejecting it; i.e., they 'suppress' the irrelevant meaning. However, less skilled readers continue to react slowly to 'ace,' as if they have not completely suppressed the irrelevant meaning of 'spade.' Whether ineffective use of context is a source of reading problems has become a complex issue taking into consideration the fact that with a focus on the component processes, individual differences in reading skill become a matter of understanding how these processes and their interactions contribute to successful reading outcomes or the loss of self confidence that may create learners' unwillingness to read (7). Where the successful outcome is reading individual words, the processes are localized in knowledge of word forms both general and word-specific phonological and orthographic knowledge—and word meanings. Inadequate knowledge of word forms is the central obstacle to acquiring high levels of skill. Severe problems in word reading reflect severe problems in phonological knowledge. Where the successful outcome is comprehension, the critical processes continue to include word processes, and problems in comprehension are associated with problems in word processing. In addition, processes that contribute to basic sentence understanding and sentence integration become critical. Processes that provide basic propositional meaning, including word meaning selection and parsing, and those that establish coherent text representations (integration processes,

inferences, monitoring, conceptual knowledge) become critical to success. Less skilled readers, as assessed by comprehension tests, often show difficulties in one or more of these processes. Less clear is how to understand the causes of observed failures. **(8)**

4-Benefits of free writing:

The Writing Process:

Writers learn to write best, when they learn and practice a messy, complicated multi-stage process—what we have called for three decades, “teaching the writing process,” which in simplest terms used to be called prewriting, writing, and rewriting—or in terms inventing, composing, researching, revising, and editing.

Toby Fulwiler states that Reading teaches you what you don't already know; writing teaches you what to make of what you read and experience. Learning to write is the most direct way of learning to reflect.

According to Peter Elbow, in: *Writing Without Teachers*, free writing not only expands ideas, but also gives inexperienced writers confidence that they have ideas worth expanding in the first place. The idea here is to make more from more—the more words, the more thoughts, the richer the writing **(9)**. Kevin Brooks states that using E-mails through which students can send to each others, at the beginning short paragraphs and then longer ones will make of a difficult task as reading a student habit shared with his class mates and friends. The journal writing is also another way to generate the learners abilities since the information he works with is already available(in his memory) The idea here is that the more students write the more they discover that they have ideas to express the more they develop confidence in their mental abilities. It is a natural place in which to compose, invent, practice, collect, and store free writing; it can be included as a regular part of the class itself, instead of assigning journals to be written outside class and never discussing the results in class **(10)**.

James Britton, in *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18), argues that writing is not merely an expression of individual thought, but a generative process that creates thought itself. The more you write, the more you think. In what Janet Emig subsequently calls "Writing as a Mode of Learning" (CCC, 1977), there is a justification for in-class writing, which proved to be a springboard for better class discussions, more focused small-group work, and more thoughtful formal papers. **(11)**

How do we teach reading through writing?

Sandra Schor explains the learning strategy as follows: teachers of reading would begin by asking students to write. Ten minutes of free writing by teachers and students engage everyone as readers and writers, converting all those who partake of the hour into active participants. After ten minutes, everyone has some stake in what is going on. Writing classes customarily move on to whole essays which carry a whole purpose. The great opportunity in combining reading and writing into a single block of classroom time is that time becomes available for an immediate reading of what has been written **(12)**

1-To apply writing as a strategy to teach reading, the teacher should first explain thoroughly the basis on which the text is to be judged:

Norms of criticism such as:

- Coherence in the writer's ideas.
- Principles of text organization when the text is not a free writing but an essay ie: the introduction, the development and the conclusion.
- The extraction of the writer's biases, main idea or opinion defended through the text.
- Style characteristics: meaningfulness of terms, sentence length, images use.....

This way of criticizing a text suits well the norms of criticism that governs all academic reading and writing applied in graduate school ie: what is important in a text is in the text itself not the historical moment, nor the author's biography and the reader's background. This simplification prepares the student to read a text without searching information about the writer or his background. **(13)**

2- Students are informed that their writing is marked: to encourage them to produce a coherent text and to make an effort to impress both teacher and classmates.

-The student who judges the writing of his classmate is supposed to produce a brief account of his observations about the text he read, this account is marked too.

-Writing, reading and evaluating are first done in the class: the teacher can divide the session according to his students abilities in writing and reading.

- The teacher can then use the anonym procedure to prevent the students from knowing who is the writer of the text they evaluate?

- Once the students show enough eagerness and ability to evaluate, the teacher can from time to time replace some of the students' copies by texts taken from master pieces of the western literature. Students who will evaluate those texts will work on them thinking that they are written by their classmates which break their fear of being unable to read.

Conclusion:

The importance of the reading skill for a foreign language learner is justified by the positive effects of this skill on the overall performance of students in learning the foreign language. The absence of motivation for reading printed texts is due to many reasons: First, they feel, that this is an artifact. 14 It is a finished work. It can affect them, but they cannot affect it. If they are asked to analyze it, it is a one-way action, for the purpose of their understanding it more effectively and more logically. Their understanding and their reaction are not solicited. But it is true that some students, through gifts of environment or genetics, come to language more assertively, with an energetic sense of the reciprocity involved in speaking and writing which enables them to be good readers however they do not constitute the majority. The factors that hinder students will to read vary between the eventual inability to select the appropriate meaning of a word within a text to the absence of self confidence in one's abilities but motivation can heal most of these problems. Thus, on the second level, that of motivation, writing before reading reveals the vulnerability of the sentence, that the work of writing is recursive: we think, we write, we read.

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N.B

Sandra Schor is Associate Professor of English at Queens College. Formerly director of composition, she was named a master teacher in CUNY's Faculty Development Program. The author of the Random House Guide to Writing (with Judith Summerfield) and the Borzoi Handbook for Writers (with Frederick Crews), she is also a frequent contributor of poems and short stories to distinguished journals. She wrote a novel: " The Great Letter E"