

Writing to Read: Enhancing ESL Students' Reading Proficiency through Written Response to Text

A discussion of the effect of writing on ESL students' reading performance provides data to demonstrate that "formal," analytical written response to text helps ESL students become more proficient readers of English.

by Loretta Frances Kasper

English as a Second Language (ESL) is the fastest growing area of study in community colleges in the United States (Crandall). The ESL students enrolling in community colleges need to build English language reading proficiency as quickly and as easily as possible if they are to succeed in the academic mainstream. For this reason, how to help students attain such proficiency has become paramount to ESL educators.

In recent years, researchers have investigated the reading processes of proficient readers. Studies of both first and second language readers indicate that successful readers focus on the communicative elements of a text, that is, on its meaning (Leki). To help ESL students attain English reading proficiency to enable them to function in college coursework, a major goal of ESL reading courses should be to teach these students to construct meaning from English language texts. Meaning construction can be facilitated by incorporating and emphasizing activities that require the ESL reader to engage in, to interact with, and to synthesize information from course texts (Ali; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Blanton; Zamel).

Meaning construction is critical to text comprehension, and both appear to depend upon the degree of active reader-

response to text (Ali; Leki). Consequently, ESL reading researchers have directed their efforts toward elucidating instructional techniques to promote increased involvement with text. An editorial comment published in the May 1995 issue of *Journal of Reading* states that, "Reading education has metamorphosed into education . . . in the integrated language arts, or literacy in its fullest sense" (645). It goes on to say that many journal articles now speak of writing as well as vocabulary and reading comprehension (as important components of a reading program). As a result, ESL reading researchers have investigated the role of writing in reading courses, and their results suggest that writing can provide students with a powerful tool to enhance text comprehension (Leki; Zamel).

Recognizing the importance of written response to meaning construction, and subsequently, to text comprehension, ESL educators have begun to incorporate a variety of writing activities into reading programs (Zamel). Students may record their reactions to a text in single- or double-entry reading journals or logs (Lay; Mlynarczyk; Spack). They may write answers to open-ended comprehension questions (Kasper, "Improved Reading Performance"). Students may also mark passages or make marginal

notations as they read (Zamel). They may write predictions about what will happen in a text and then compare their predictions with those of other students (Kasper, "Using Multimedia"). Finally, students may analyze, from a number of different perspectives, the issues, themes, or concepts presented in a reading text (Flower).

Petrosky contends that writing may enhance comprehension by allowing ESL readers to articulate their understandings of and connections to a text. However, do all types of written response have equally facilitative effects on ESL students' reading proficiency? Although much of the literature cited makes no distinction between various writing activities, Flower categorizes written response as either "informal" or "formal." As defined by Flower, "informal" activities require a response to a specific element in an individual text. Reading logs, open-ended comprehension questions, marginal notations, and predictions are examples of "informal" response. In contrast, "formal" activities require a more extensive analysis of issues/themes presented in the text. Analytical essays in a variety of rhetorical modes are examples of "formal" response.

Therefore, a response is "informal" or "formal" based on the degree of interaction with text required by that written response. According to Flower, "informal" response, such as a reading log, requires minimal interaction with text because it assumes that the reader and writer share similar information about the text, and so it requires less detailed explanation and elaboration. In contrast, "formal" response to text, such as an analytical essay, must meet the needs of a reader who may be unfamiliar with the text. Thus, a "formal" written response includes more information from more varied sources. In

addition, an analytical response argues a thesis and so requires more complex manipulation of the themes and concepts presented in the reading text.

The literature contains a number of qualitative studies recommending the use of "informal" writing activities, such as reading logs, in ESL reading courses (Lay; Mlynarczyk; Spack). Unfortunately, to date, there is little, if any, quantitative evidence to determine whether "informal" and "formal" writing activities have differential effects on ESL students' overall English language reading skill. However, if we wish to maximize the benefits derived from integrating reading and writing, we need to determine specifically which types of writing activities will lead to the greatest enhancement of reading comprehension.

If, as suggested by Blanton, we view reading comprehension as a cognitive/intellectual interaction between the reader and the text, then activities which foster deeper levels of text processing should result in greater levels of text comprehension. To enhance comprehension, writing activities must encourage students to relate the text to their own experience, knowledge, ideas, and reflections; in short, these activities must lead students to become actively involved with the text. As Bartholomae and Petrosky contend, improvement in reading skill depends most on what students do with what they read, that is, on how they engage the text.

Nevertheless, ESL reading instruction has too often focused on strategies that facilitate students' comprehension of specific elements of text content. These strategies include how to identify the main idea of a text or how to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word used in that text. Unfortunately, these activities do not require the reader to interact

with nor to elaborate on the content of that particular text, nor do they require the reader to synthesize information drawn from different texts, that is, to make intertextual connections (Chi).

In contrast, producing a formal written response to text requires the student to analyze, from a number of different perspectives, the issues, themes, or concepts presented in that text. In composing a formal response, the student must think and rethink the text, focusing attention on the global elements of text, that is, on its overall meaning. Attending to the global elements of a text means that the student comes to understand its meaning by drawing connections to personal experience, knowledge, and other texts read. Moreover, having students compose a formal response also teaches them critical thinking skills, such as analysis, interpretation, inference, and synthesis of knowledge. Each of these has been identified as a major component of the process of meaning construction (Gajdusek and vanDommelen; Spires, Huntley-Johnston, and Huffman). Therefore, since formal writing activities require a more profound level of interaction with text content and themes, these activities should result in greater enhancement of overall reading proficiency.

Comparing Informal and Formal Response to Text

I wanted to use writing to its best advantage with my ESL students, and I could find no data which would help me determine if one type of writing activity were better than another. Therefore, I decided to run my own study to compare the effects of “informal” versus “formal” writing activities on reading proficiency as measured by scores on

two separate end-of-semester reading assessment examinations.

The study ran for two semesters and included four separate classes of ESL analytical reading (ESL 04). I designated two of the classes as the “informal” group, and the other two classes as the “formal” group. There was a total of 80 students in the study. There were 40 students in the “informal” ESL 04 group, and 40 students in the “formal” ESL 04 group.

The students in these four classes were at the high-intermediate level. These students represented diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, including Russian, Haitian, Hispanic, and Asian. All of my ESL students were working toward, at minimum, a two-year college degree, but most would go on to pursue more advanced college degrees.

To compare the effects of “informal” versus “formal” writing activities on reading proficiency, I had students in two of the classes engage in “informal” writing activities, while in the other two classes, students engaged in “formal” writing activities. There was an “informal” and a “formal” group included in both semesters of the study.

In order to evaluate any subsequent differential effects of “informal” versus “formal” writing activities on reading performance, I needed to establish that all students entered ESL 04 at comparable levels of reading proficiency. To ascertain reading levels, all students were given the same practice reading test during the first week of the semester. This practice test was based on the format of the Kingsborough English Departmental Final Examination and contained eight open-ended questions and one summary question. Students in the “informal” group received an average score of 53 on

this practice test, while those in the “formal” group received an average score of 52. Therefore, students in both the “informal” and the “formal” groups began the semester at basically comparable levels of reading proficiency. Therefore, any subsequent differences found should be due to the activities in the reading courses themselves.

Readings and Activities

ESL 04, Analytical Reading, meets for a total of 36 classroom hours during a twelve-week semester. All four classes were run as discipline-oriented theme courses (Kasper, “Discipline-Oriented”), where all readings were the same for each class and focused on various topics within the discipline of psychology. Studies have shown that discipline-oriented courses, which teach English language skills through the content of various academic disciplines, are effective in helping ESL students improve their overall English language skills and in facilitating their transition into the academic mainstream (Benesch; CUNY Language Forum; Guyer and Peterson; Kasper, “Improved Reading Performance”; Snow and Brinton).

Students in both groups in my study read the same texts. The topics covered included the history of psychology, first and second language acquisition, human development, and psychopathology. Readings consisted of the text, *Teaching English through the Disciplines: Psychology* by Kasper, a collection of topical nonfiction articles, and two books, *Dibs in Search of Self* by Virginia Axline and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* by Joanne Greenberg. Students read the topical articles and the books concurrently over the course of the twelve-week semester.

Students in the “informal” group completed reading logs. In each reading log, students had to respond to an assigned number of pages in *Dibs* or in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. Students answered a set of six questions, which asked them: (1) to identify the main idea of that section of the book, (2) to identify and describe important new developments, (3) to identify and describe new characters, (4) to explain what that section added to the development of the story, (5) to choose and explain one quotation from that section of the book, and (6) to list and define five new vocabulary words found in that section of the book. Students completed and turned in their reading logs every two weeks during the semester.

Students in the “formal” group wrote analytical pieces on topics drawn from the readings. These pieces spanned several rhetorical modes, and included personal narrative, comparison/contrast, and expository/persuasive compositions. For example, students were asked to respond to the following essay prompt: “Think of your experiences as a second language learner. Describe a “special” experience that you have had in English. This “special” experience may be positive or negative. Why was that experience “special?” What did that experience teach you about the way we learn and understand a new language? Relate your experience to what you learned from reading ‘The Multilingual Mind’ by Beryl Lieff Benderly.”

Thus, issues in the readings provided a springboard for the essay topics which required students to relate course texts to their personal experience, to compare and/or contrast principles presented in different course readings, or to interpret, analyze, and synthesize information gained from various course texts. Each

essay required students to expand upon the information presented in the readings and to use that information to support their positions. Students completed and turned in a new essay every two weeks during the semester.

In addition to the different “informal” and “formal” activities completed by students in the two groups, for each of the topical articles, both groups completed reading comprehension exercises consisting of eight open-ended questions and one summary question. These exercises were based on the format of the Kingsborough English Department Final Examination and were designed to help prepare students for this examination. Here are some examples of the open-ended questions: “What is the main idea of this article?” “Which functions are controlled by the brain’s left hemisphere? Which are controlled by the right?” and “What did scientists learn by comparing early bilinguals with later bilinguals?”

Reading Assessment Measures

At the end of the twelve-week semester, students in both groups took two tests to assess their reading proficiency. The first test was the Descriptive Test of Language Skills (DTLS); the second was the Kingsborough English Departmental Final Examination.

The DTLS is a timed, multiple choice reading comprehension examination developed by the College Board. Students must prove their reading proficiency by passing this test in order to continue beyond the 60th credit (roughly equivalent to two years of study) in colleges within the City University of New York system. The Kingsborough English Departmental Final Examination is two hours long and requires short written answers to in-

ferential questions on a one- to two-page reading passage. This test is developed by a committee of Kingsborough English faculty. Students must pass one of these tests to pass reading. Students who do not pass either of the tests have to repeat reading.

Results

A comparison of the scores on the end-of-semester reading assessment examinations indicates that the average grade on each of the two reading tests is higher for the “formal” group than for the “informal” group. The passing score on the DTLS was 27. The passing score on the English Departmental Final Exam was 65. Students in the “informal” group obtained an average score of 24 on the DTLS and 59 on the English Departmental Final Exam. Students in the “formal” group obtained an average score of 28 on the DTLS and 80 on the English Departmental Final Exam.

During the two semesters of my study, the college norm for all other students enrolled in ESL 04 was an average score of 26 on the DTLS and an average score of 66 on the English Departmental Final Exam. These scores were from students who had written a mix of “informal” responses, in the form of reading logs, and “formal” responses, in the form of personal narrative essays. Thus, the scores of the students in my “formal” group were also higher than the college norm.

If students pass either of the two reading assessment examinations, they are given a grade of A, B, or C for the reading course. This grade is based on their overall performance in the course. If they pass neither of the two tests, they receive a grade of R and must repeat the course. There is a marked difference in

reading course grades for “informal” and “formal” group students. In the “informal” group, 21% received A; 18% received B; 26% received C; and 35% of the students received R and had to repeat the reading course. In the “formal” group, 43% of students received A; 37% received B; 9% received C; and only 11% received R and had to repeat the reading course.

The college norm for the two semesters of my study was as follows: 24% of students received A; 37% received B; 13% received C; and 26% received R and had to repeat the reading course. Therefore, not only did the students in the “formal” group achieve higher grades on both reading assessment examinations, but their overall reading course performance was also substantially better than that of both the students in the “informal” group and the college norm.

Formal Writing and Reading Performance

The results of my study suggest that the degree of interaction with text required by the writing activity appears to be critical to improving text comprehension and overall reading proficiency. The study provides quantitative evidence that it is not simply the act of writing in response to reading, but the specific type of written response required, that is most important to facilitating ESL students' reading performance. Specifically, students who produced formal written responses to texts obtained significantly higher scores on each of two different reading assessment examinations than did students who produced only informal written responses to the same texts.

As suggested by the work of Zamel, the formal writing activities seem to have

offered my students a means for working out a reading, thereby providing insights into the text that may not have been obvious the first time that text was read. In order to write an analytical essay about the subject of a reading text, students had to have understood and considered that text from several different perspectives, both their own and those of others. Formal response to a reading required students to incorporate key ideas and relevant facts, to integrate their own background knowledge into the textual material, and then to reinterpret their experience or that presented in the text from a different perspective.

Therefore, when students composed a formal response to text, that text became a richer and more meaningful experience as reading built knowledge to use in writing, and writing consolidated knowledge in a way that built schemata to read with. Activities that call upon students to develop and elaborate schemata have the greatest effect on enhancing overall English language reading proficiency (Kasper, “Improved Reading Performance”). As they wrote each analytical essay, students in the “formal” group needed to think through course materials and generalize and apply information to related situations. This caused them to become more deeply involved in the reading text, and to view that text as a source of knowledge, as something truly relevant to their lives, and not just as an exercise in developing reading skills. Petrosky has said that such extended discourse with text is the only way to demonstrate comprehension. Based on their performance on the end-of-semester examinations, this extended processing appears to have taught the students in the “formal” group what it means to be a good reader, thereby improving overall reading proficiency.

In contrast, for students in the “Informal” group, simply writing down personal reactions to or answering questions about the readings did not enhance comprehension to the same degree. This suggests that reading classes that incorporate only informal writing activities requiring students to focus on specific elements of an individual text are not using writing to its best advantage. Reading logs and comprehension questions, used in this way, may improve the understanding of that specific text, but they do not appear to have a facilitative effect on overall reading performance. If the goal of using writing in the reading class is to enhance ESL students’ overall reading proficiency, instructors must design activities that will encourage students to engage intellectually with the text and will foster a belief that reading and writing involve the active construction of meaning.

To foster deeper levels of text processing, informal writing activities such as reading logs and inferential questions should be structured to require connections to be made between the text and the reader’s personal experience and/or between issues presented in different texts. For informal writing activities to enhance overall reading proficiency, they must redirect the student’s priorities from simply finding the main idea of a specific text to discovering the global

significance of the ideas expressed in that text. For example, instead of asking students “What is the main idea of the article, ‘The Multilingual Mind’ by Beryl Lief Benderly?” we might ask them to, “Relate the results of research comparing the second language performance of early bilinguals and later bilinguals to your own experience learning and using a second language.”

Conclusion

If ESL students are to approach English language texts as a true source of knowledge rather than as a simple exercise in developing reading skills, they must see these texts as relevant to their lives. Students become better readers when they use text content to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Informal writing activities may be used to help ESL students develop and consolidate such knowledge if the activities are designed with these goals in mind.

Enhanced reading performance results when ESL students’ come to view English language texts as an experience from which they may gain both knowledge and enjoyment. Writing activities which encourage ESL students to adopt this view will have the greatest effect on developing their overall English language reading proficiency.

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1995 CCCC Election Results

Cynthia L. Selfe, Michigan Technological University, was elected to the post of Assistant Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. She will succeed, in accordance with the CCCC Constitution and By-Laws, to the posts of Associate Chair, Chair, and Immediate Past Chair. Barbara Stout, Montgomery College (Maryland) was elected Secretary and will serve a four-year term. Nine colleagues were elected to three-year terms on the Executive Committee: Nedra Reynolds, University of Rhode Island; Gesa E. Kirsch, Wayne State University; LuMing Mao, Miami University, Ohio; Kermit E. Campbell, University of Texas, Austin; Patricia Harkin, Purdue University; Richard H. Haswell, Washington State University; Rebecca E. Burnett, Iowa State University; Teresa M. Redd, Howard University; and Elizabeth A. Nist, Anoka-Ramsey Community College, Minnesota.

Freddy L. Thomas, Virginia State University, was elected Chair of the 1996 Nominating Committee. Other colleagues elected to the Nominating Committee are Sarah-Hope Parmeter, University of California, Santa Cruz; Elizabeth Rankin, University of North Dakota; Linda Johnson, Southeast Technical Institute, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Mara Holt, Ohio University.