# Read and Write: An Integrative Approach to Teaching Writing Skills to First Year Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract:** *The practice in most ESL classrooms of teaching reading and writing as disparate linguistic components negates the concept of integration in education. Most English Language syllabuses present the teaching of reading and writing skills as separate entities which should be learned independent of the other. The rationale behind this curriculum design hinges on the fact that learners need to be exposed to different styles of writing through reading to ensure the acquisition of vocabulary and other linguistic forms in the target language before writing can be embarked upon. However, this paper argues that reading and writing are two complementary language skills which should be learned simultaneously because one mutually reinforces the other. The paper suggests an integrative approach to the teaching of reading and writing at the tertiary level where undergraduate students have an enormous amount of reading and writing to contend with. When writing activities are based on readings, the interplay of the two skills eases the abstractness and difficulty associated with writing and enriches the writing process. The paper further suggests techniques for integrating reading and writing skills that would assist first year undergraduate students at the University of Botswana in performing their academic writing tasks. An integrative approach to reading and writing hopefully, will help to make learners better readers, better writers and critical thinkers; and invariably will ensure improvement in their academic performance across the curriculum.*

**Keywords:** *Integrative approach, reading process, writing process, ESL, Constructivism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing skills are so closely related that teaching one skill exclusive of the other is a huge disservice to the learning process. The interconnectedness of the two language skills have long been identified by researchers (Brummit-Yale, 2008; Goen & Gillotte-Trop, 2003; Shanahan, 1980; 1988). Research studies highlight that reading and writing are so closely related that their curricular combination could have a positive outcome in terms of achievement or instructional efficiency (Shanahan, 1988). Research has further demonstrated that reading and writing are related even in their earliest stages (Juel, Griffiths & Gough, 1986; Sulzby, 1987). For example, both reading and writing are language skills that have communicative functions, both make use of the written format for communication; both are building blocks of literacy; both skills are developmental processes which are learnt over a long period; both reading and writing are process-oriented thinking skills (Squire, 1983:581). According to Tierney & Lazansky (1980), good readers think about writers and good writers think about readers. Furthermore, Langer & Filhan (2000) posit that reading and writing are considered intertwined and inseparable language tools; the two skills are intertwined and embedded in the larger picture of literacy. Reading, therefore, affects writing and writing affects reading.

Research studies have also shown that when children read extensively, they become better writers. A great deal of what we know comes from the texts we have read and when we write, we tap into this previous knowledge or schema and factor in the knowledge into our writing. Reading, therefore, plays a vital role in writing. There is a supportive, interactive relationship between the reading and writing process (DeFord, 1981: 657) which should be exploited by teachers in the ESL classroom to facilitate learning.

However, in spite of the interrelationship between reading and writing, curriculum designers in Botswana still treat these two language skills as disparate components. Goen & Gillotte- Tropp (2003) state that there is a historical and persistent trend in literacy education to treat reading and

writing as distinct and separate processes. Langer & Filman (2000) explain that writing and reading theory and research have very different, but sometimes overlapping histories. According to them, both reading and writing grew from separate bodies of scholarship and focused on separate aspects of education. It was not until the 1970s and 80s that the two skills became conceptualized as being integrated. There is also the belief that the teaching of reading should precede that of writing (Shanahan 1988). Admittedly, children learn to read before they learn to write but after the two skills have been learnt, there is no reason why instruction in the two skills should be compartmentalized, because one skill reinforces the other.

A close look at the language syllabuses at the junior secondary, senior secondary and tertiary levels in Botswana education system reveal that reading and writing skills have continued to be taught as separate and discrete components. For example, the Junior Certificate (JC) English syllabus is divided into units namely: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Literature, Grammar and Computer Assisted Language Learning, with suggestions for grammar and literature to be integrated in the teaching of the language skills (Republic of Botswana, Ministry of Education & Skills Development, 2008, English Syllabus). It is commendable that the teaching of grammar and literature are integrated at this level. Ideally, there should be integration in the teaching of all the language skills especially at the secondary school level. That is to say, an integrative approach should be adopted in teaching all the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) at the junior and secondary school levels of the education system.

At the diploma level, the Communication and Study Skills syllabuses for the primary and secondary colleges of education in Botswana also treat these skills as separate components, with reading taught in one term and writing in the following term. At the university level, the practice is much the same. The Communication and Study Skills syllabus at the University of Botswana has reading skills and writing skills taught as separate units, with reading coming before the writing component. In the light of these observations, this paper argues for an integrative approach to the teaching of writing at the tertiary level where students have an enormous amount of reading and writing tasks to contend with. The author believes that an integrative approach promises great benefits to learners, and will ease the tremendous pressure and difficulties that students encounter when confronted with writing tasks at the tertiary level.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in the constructivist theory of learning. Constructivism views learners as active participants in the learning process, who do not just passively receive information, but make connections between what they have acquired previously and the current information (Hanley, 1994; Glasersfeld, 2001). The common belief in constructivism is that the previous knowledge and experiences of individuals are crucial in the process of creating new knowledge. Constructivism emphasizes the cultivation of the spirit of inquiry through questioning, sharing ideas through collaborative learning and the creation of knowledge based on learners previous knowledge and experiences of the world (Edington, 2007). Both reading and writing deal with the construction of knowledge, making use of previous knowledge and experiences to predict and make inferences. Constructivist theory supports the concept of integration within the school curriculum. Within the approach, the teacher is seen as a facilitator who creates situations in which the learner can change, enrich and link his previous knowledge and current knowledge (Moore, 2004). Learning occurs through interactions with and within the environment in which these interactions take place (Moore 2004). Within these contexts, teachers help to explore learners' understandings by providing them with ample opportunities to consider personal responses to the texts they compose, to make links between their prior experiences and what they are reading and writing. The constructivist theory therefore provides the theoretical framework for discussing the integration of reading and writing in the ESL classroom.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of education, there is the global move towards integration throughout the curriculum (Kelly, 2013). Kelly asserts that interweaving curriculum gives students power over their knowledge. She explains that cross connections are important to the students' learning experience, and these connections can be found throughout the curriculum. Courses that are regarded as

related such as History and Literature, Language and Literature, Mathematics and Science, Science and Technology are being integrated in the school curriculum.

Conyer (1993) states that there are pedagogical arguments in favour of integrated learning. The integrative approach to learning is said to promote creativity, curiosity, determination, independent learning, self-reliance, adaptability and team spirit in each student. In this regard, the concept of integration in education is closely linked to the constructivist theory of learning because both seek to achieve the same goals in the learner.

Researchers that have experimented on integrating reading into writing courses have reported the huge benefits that students have derived in their writing tasks (Goen & Gillotte-Tropp, 2003; McCormick, 1994; Shanahan, 1988; Stotsky, 1983; Zamel, 1992). Research also suggests that reading and writing in combination are more likely to prompt critical thinking than when reading is separated from writing (Tierney et al, 1989: 134). In summarizing research on the connections between reading and writing, Stotsky (1983) affirms that 'better writers tend to be better readers', that 'better writers tend to read more than poorer writers' and that 'better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers'. Tierney and Lays (1986) also agree that 'selecting reading experiences definitely contribute to writing performance.

Furthermore, some language scholars have developed a pedagogical approach to integrating reading and writing known as the 'reading-to-write' construct (Carver, 1997; Delaney, 2008; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Kintsch, 1998; Plakans, 2008; Ruiz-Funez, 2008; Spivey, 1990, 1997). Reading-to-write refers to instructional tasks that combine reading and writing for various educational purposes (e.g. summary writing as a learning tool) (Fitzgerald & Shanahan 2000). Reading-to-write involves either reading to learn or reading to integrate information (Grabe & Stoller 2002). Reading-to write focuses on the interplay of reading and writing processes in which the learner is involved in organizing, selecting and connecting ideas in an effort to construct meaning (Spivey 1990, 1997). The constructivist perspective on reading-to-write emphasizes the interaction of both reading and writing in promoting meaning construction. Integrating reading and writing certainly provides multiple benefits as research findings reveal. Hillocks (1987) found that reading in a content area provides students with information to include in compositions; writing about content that has been read appears to enhance 'higher order' thinking' and recall (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991) ; reading before writing increases length (Noyce & Christie, 1985)  and quality of compositions (Tierney et al, 1989). In addition, integrating reading and writing activities help students cope in university courses (Reid, 1993; Spack, 1993; Zamel, 1993). At the tertiary level, students' success is dependent on their ability to interact with texts. Students have a large amount of reading to do in order to extract information and ideas to use in writing assignments, tests and examinations.

Furthermore, writing is considered the most abstract of the language skills, therefore, integration of reading and writing reduces the abstractness as reading texts  provide a 'visual model'  and as what to write will come from the readings.  In other words, reading enriches the writing activity. Moreover, reading for a purpose has always been advocated. An integrative approach where reading tasks are tied to writing exercises underlines this purpose and helps create motivation and concentration during the reading exercise. Reading activities should provide a platform for writing exercises for improved writing performance.

## 4. INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING IN THE TERTIARY CLASSROOM

Writing is perhaps the most complex and difficult of all the language skills, an assertion which is supported by scholars and researchers (Abu Rass, 2006; Simpson, 2012; Zamel, 1987). Simpson (2012) states that writing remains one of the most difficult areas for the teacher and learner. The complexity and intricate web of processes involved in the writing process become intimidating and overwhelming to the student writer. The bewilderment and apprehension often noticed when students are asked to undertake writing tasks corroborate this fact. Abdel Latif (2012) confirms that high levels of apprehension cause students to have writing difficulties. Stanley (2003) also believes that because writing is a complex process, it can lead to learner frustration. These observations aptly apply to first year undergraduate students at the University of Botswana. They find writing a challenging and daunting exercise. When they are given writing tasks in class, they

become overwhelmed and apprehensive; perhaps, because they do not know where and how to begin the writing exercise. The process approach to writing helps to reduce the pressure that students feel in the writing classroom. Process writing, according to Goldstein & Carr (1996), refers to a broad range of strategies that include pre-writing activities such as defining audience, using a variety of resources, planning the writing, as well as drafting and revising. Stanley (2003) explains that the process approach treats all writing as a creative act, which requires time and positive feedback. The teacher's role in the process approach is that of a facilitator rather than the person who gives students a writing task and collects the finished product for marking, without any input or intervention in the writing process.

The process writing approach has indeed made writing tasks less cumbersome. However, writing still remains a nightmare for student writers at every level of the education system. This author believes that integration of reading and writing in the writing classroom will help to demystify writing tasks and make them less laborious and cumbersome.

Reading, on the other hand, is regarded as the most essential language skill in literacy development. Like writing, reading is a complex activity. Ganjang (1997) posits that reading is one of the most complicated skills developed by man. As complex as reading is, it is the basis for all aspects of formal education. It is central to learning and proficiency in reading ensures enhanced academic performance. Pardede (2006) states that reading is a service skill; after learning how to read effectively, students will be able to learn effectively by reading.

Reading, like writing, is a process which takes place in stages, namely: the pre-reading, while reading and the post reading stages. Langer & Filhan (2000) reveal that because writing and reading involve the development of meaning, both were conceptualized as composing activities in the sense that both involve planning, generating and revising meaning. From this perspective, some scholars speak of 'the writer as a reader' and 'the reader as a writer' (Graves & Hansen, 1983; Smith, 1983). In addition, Squire (1983:581) stresses that "failure to recognize that composing and comprehending are process-oriented thinking skills which are basically interrelated… impedes our efforts not only to teach children to read and write, but our efforts to teach them how to think". Consequently, basing writing tasks on readings as a way of motivating and inspiring students to write without the apprehension associated with writing will significantly improve students' writing abilities.

## 5. STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING IN THE TERTIARY CLASSROOM

From the constructivist point of view, the teacher as a facilitator creates an enabling environment for effective learning to take place in the classroom. One way of doing this is to create a variety of learning contexts such as "cooperative learning groups and peer dyads, where discussions and instructional scaffolding support students' needs" (Hiebert, 1991). In other words, teachers should encourage collaborative learning by giving group tasks, using class discussions and peer reviews. Students should be given ample opportunities to ask questions, discover answers and create knowledge. Giesen (2001) states that, students need to be given the authority and independence to figure things out for themselves within a supportive classroom atmosphere.

In order to motivate and encourage students in the writing classroom, readings should be incorporated into writing tasks. The reading activity serves to diffuse the tense atmosphere in the writing classroom and prepares students for writing tasks. The suggested activities below, therefore, are aimed at giving students the opportunity to discover meaning for themselves with the teacher facilitating the learning process. Before every writing activity, it is suggested that the teacher should carefully select a reading passage that would form the basis of the writing activity. The teacher should select passages from students' specific disciplines- Science, Social Science, Engineering, Medicine, Media Studies, Environmental Studies, Humanities or passages on general knowledge such as education, technology, politics etc. This is to ensure that students can tap into their schemata in trying to understand the text. Specific tasks should also be designed by the teacher before the class activities begin. The suggested activities, based on Giesen (2001) model, are meant for first year undergraduate level writing classes.

### Activity 1- Writing a thesis statement/ introductory paragraph

- At the beginning of the class, teacher distributes a reading passage that has been carefully selected from students' specific disciplines.
- Students read the text individually (careful reading), and then have a class discussion on the topic that has been read. The teacher can also pose questions which will guide the class discussion.
- The class discussion helps to generate ideas for the writing task that will follow.
- Teacher writes the essay topic on the board and asks students to go into groups.
- In groups, students brainstorm on the essay topic, generate ideas, also making use of ideas generated during the class discussion.
- In groups, they draw up an outline, write the thesis statement and/or the introductory paragraph (this will depend on the focus of the writing task). Students share their work with the rest of the class.

- Teacher can then ask students to individually write an essay on the topic and submit in the next lesson.

The individual reading of the text provides information and vocabulary that students need for the writing task. The pre-writing activities namely, class discussion, group work, presentation to the whole class and feedback from teacher/ students- are meant to stimulate students' critical thinking and help them create knowledge in a supportive classroom. Also, the activities help to diffuse the tense atmosphere and create a relaxed environment for the writing task. Furthermore, sharing ideas enriches the writing exercise and helps students establish a sense of community in the learning process (Edington, 2007; Giesen, 2001).

### Activity 2: Defining a Concept

- Teacher selects an appropriate reading passage- from students' textbooks, which define or classify a concept in their subject areas.
- Gives the students the topic/ title of the passage that they are to read.
- Asks students to brainstorm (in groups) on the topic and write down whatever point that comes to mind.
- Teacher can give students questions as prompts or give them sentence starters to help tease out a definition of the key concept in the reading passage, e.g.

  Technology is-----

  Technology helps in -----

  Technology provides ---
- Ask students to complete the sentences in as many ways as possible
- Pool students' answers together and project on the screen or write on the board.
- Ask students to read the selected passage
- Let them identify similarities and differences between the ideas they generated and ideas in the passage.
- Teacher asks students to write the essay (individually or in groups) using the ideas they generated and those from the passage.

This activity helps students to enrich their vocabulary and to activate their background knowledge. It helps them build confidence especially when they realize that some of their ideas match those in the text. Most of all, the activity provides content on which to write the essay. The group task in this activity serves as a collaborative strategy to diffuse the degree of apprehension often associated with the writing classroom.

### Activity 3: Predicting a text

The purpose of this activity is for students to preview a text in order to make predictions about the content.

- Teacher selects an appropriate reading text for this exercise.
- Asks students to skim the text in order to get the gist or the general idea of the text. Skimming a text includes the following:

- Read the title and sub titles of the text
- Read the introductory paragraph
- Read the topic sentence of each of the paragraphs
- Read the concluding paragraph

- Asks students to put the text away and write down in one paragraph, what they think the text is about or what they think will happen in the text based on the previewing activity.
- Asks students to go into groups so that they can share their paragraphs and compare their predictions with group members.
- Asks students to read the entire passage to compare their predictions with the contents of the text.
- Teacher then asks students to write a summary of the text individually.

This activity gives students practice in previewing, skimming and making predictions/ drawing inferences. It also creates a purpose for reading and motivates them to confirm or refute their predictions about the text. These are all useful strategies for effective reading at the tertiary level.

## Activity 4: Identifying main points and supporting details

This activity is aimed at giving students practice in identifying main ideas and supporting details in a text. It should also assist them to write topic sentences and supporting sentences.

- Teacher selects an appropriate reading text.
- Asks students to read the text (careful reading) and highlight or underline main ideas in the passage.
- They should also identify supporting details in each paragraph. Students can create two columns on their paper and write down main points in one column and supporting details in the other column.
- Asks students to work in groups to compare their selections with group members.
- Have a class discussion to generate ideas. Teacher should guide the discussion and clarify any misconceptions.
- Allow students time to study the topic sentences and supporting sentences in order for them to see how these sentences are constructed.
- Ask students to write a summary of the text using the main ideas identified in the passage. Teacher can also give students a related topic to write an essay on (group work) using the text as a model for writing topic sentences and supporting sentences.

This activity helps students to focus on particular features of a text. It gives them practice in identifying topic sentences, supporting sentences and generally helps them to discover how texts are organized. When students understand how authors use supporting details to expand their ideas and develop paragraphs, they may be able to apply the same technique in their own writing (Giesen, 2001). It will also give them practice in summary writing if they are made to understand that summaries are based on the main ideas in a text.

## Activity 5: Reading and recalling information

The aim of this activity is to give students practice in academic reading and recalling information from a text. At the university level, undergraduate students have an enormous amount of reading to contend with in all their courses. They should therefore understand how best to get information from texts in order to learn effectively.

- Teacher selects an appropriate reading passage.

- Students are given time to do a careful reading of the passage. They should be encouraged to write down key words and take brief notes of main points.

- Students are then asked to put the text aside and try to recall what they have read.

- Ask students to write down everything they remember from the reading exercise.

- Ask them to go back to the text to discover points that they missed out (reviewing or revising) at the recall stage.

- Ask students to use the notes they made at the reading stage to reconstruct the passage. Alternatively, students can be asked to write a summary of the passage and submit to the teacher.

This is a useful exercise for both reading and writing across the curriculum. Students can apply these skills as they study in all their subjects using the SQ3R (Robinson, 1970) reading technique to get information from textbooks, make notes based on readings and generally learn effectively in their various disciplines.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Reading and writing are complementary language skills and should be integrated in the ESL classroom for enhanced academic performance. The primary purpose for integrating reading and writing is for reinforcement, so that reading will reinforce writing and vice versa. Writing, which has been identified as the most difficult language skill, can enjoy the support reading offers in the writing classroom. In addition, the frustration and difficulty that students experience when they are compelled to write will be greatly reduced. The desire of any teacher should be to see their students become effective readers and writers; students who can think critically, analytically and creatively; students who can take responsibility for their own learning and become confident in themselves as they navigate the difficult learning terrain. To be able to realize this, teachers must provide an enabling environment and give students the needed support to accomplish challenging tasks. Integration of reading and writing skills is one sure approach that offers that support in the writing classroom. It may be a difficult task to accomplish at the university level, given time constraints and all; however, any approach that can help students achieve proficiency in reading and writing should be worth exploring.

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