

Reading-to-Write: A Practice of Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

Reading-to-write, a term taken from language testing studies, puts great emphasis on a student-centered learning atmosphere, on the situational context and cooperative learning, on an authentic learning environment, on making use of various information resources, and on the process of the individuals' meaning construction and critical thinking. The application of this model in class will shed lights on College English teaching in China, providing the English teachers with a new perception of language teaching: Reading and writing can be integrated to elicit more authentic language use, and skill training and critical thinking are not two separate stages.

1. Introduction

The English majors in China must finish some basic courses before their graduation, in which Reading and Writing are the two fundamental ones. Reading ability is supposed to be promoted in the Reading course, while improving the students' writing level falls naturally into the hands of the course instructor of Writing. The integration of reading and writing is theoretically admitted but practically neglected by most English teachers. While teaching both the Intensive Reading and Academic Writing, I found that Reading-to-write is a useful model in either the reading class or the writing class. In the process of reading, the students for the first time have an interaction with the writers, and in the process of writing, they come to interact with the readers. With the purpose of expressing their understanding by writing, the reading process must be completed with more care and critical thinking.

Reading-to-write, a term taken from language testing studies, is in contrast to writing-only (Plakans, 2008; Plakans & Gebril, 2012; Plakans & Gebril, 2013). In language testing studies, reading-to-write tasks are compared with writing-only tasks, and results show sharp differences in their processes. Reading-to-write tasks show large differences across writers based on their experience and interest in writing, making composing a more constructive process, while writing-only tasks require writers to use more effort in planning before writing and result more often in placement into writing courses (Plakans, 2008). The advantages of integrating reading with writing include the following steps: Reading to gain ideas about the topic; shaping opinion on the topic; using source texts for evidence, and using source texts for language support (Plakans & Gebril, 2012).

Reading-to-write can be applied in classroom teaching. In language learning contexts, academic writing tasks are often integrated with reading, listening, or speaking to elicit more authentic integrative language use. The integration of reading and writing is frequently discussed because scholars agree that working with source texts is one of the most challenging of all academic literacy activities for L2 writers (Cumming, 2013), and the source text materials benefit writing in either knowledge telling or knowledge transforming (Hirvela & Du, 2013).

2. Reading-to-write: The process of critical thinking

Reading-to-write involves critical thinking and creative writing which are always the focus of philosophy, linguistics and writing studies. Creative writing asks for critical thinking, the abilities to find out the problems and then to provide the solutions (Saxton et al, 2012). Most scholars hold the view that reading widely can improve the learners' writing abilities, and in the process of writing, the logical thinking abilities will be enhanced (Cavdar & Doe, 2012; Gao Qiuping, 2013). Studies have already found that there is a close

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relationship between writing and critical thinking, and all the values and competencies, like critical thinking, are socially constructed and highly situated within different disciplines (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004).

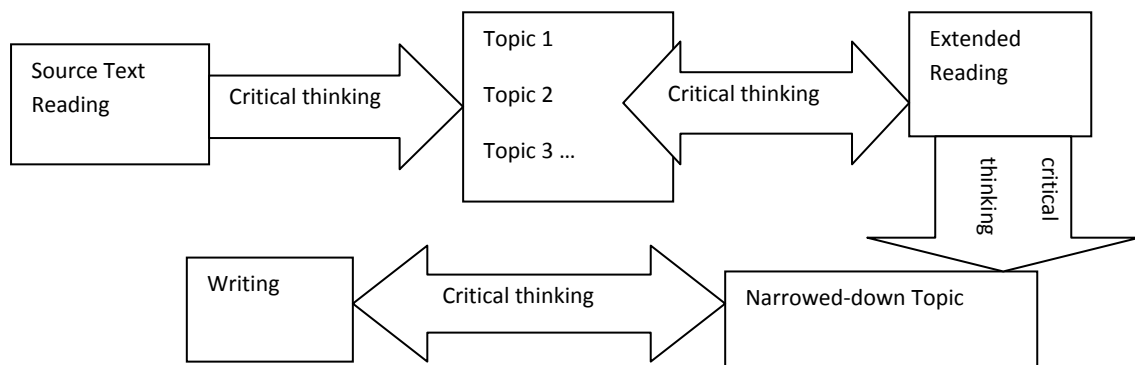
To develop the students' creative and critical thinking abilities in writing has always aroused most College English teachers' curiosity (Gao Qiuping, 2013). But what are the specific aspects of critical thinking and how to cultivate those aspects, touched by some scholars, still remain to be further studied. The commonly agreed seven key areas of critical thinking are as follows (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004):

- (1) Identification of a problem or issue
- (2) Establishment of a clear perspective on the issue
- (3) Recognition of alternative perspectives
- (4) Location of the issue within an appropriate context(s)
- (5) Identification and evaluation of evidence
- (6) Recognition of fundamental assumptions implicit or stated by the representation of an issue
- (7) Assessment of implications and potential conclusions.

These key areas will be touched in the whole process from selection of a topic to the completion of a paper in the Reading-to-writing Model. In this model reading means both the basic source text reading and the enlarged specific field-reading, and writing goes beyond the self-reflection of some given topics or the assigned summary writing based on the source text. Though summary writing, based on reading, is a basic method of academic writing (Hood, 2008; Hirvela & Du, 2013; Murray, 2013) we found that the students would feel bored if they are always given a summary writing task. In reading, they are expected to read and analyze the original source text and then enlarge the selected field by reading additional materials. In writing, they are encouraged to select a challenging topic and write on it. Therefore, for the same source text, papers with different ideas will be produced. The basic procedure of this method is that the students first read some materials of the target language, then find out the problems, and finally state their opinions on the paper from one special perspective (Zhang & Xi, 2012).

Reading-to-write gives the student an opportunity to select a writing topic from the source materials according to their own interest, which triggers curiosity and leaves thinking space to individuals. And it requires a further reading on the selected field, which helps them to find evidence of ideas and support of language use in writing. To put it simply, reading provides opportunities for identifying the possible problems and writing requires the reasonable solutions, in both processes critical thinking is necessary, because selecting and incorporating source materials effectively into academic writing requires students not only to be familiar with defined areas of disciplinary content, but also be able to represent themselves through their writing as articulate and authoritative authors (Thompson et al, 2013).

No matter how effective the method is, Reading-to-writing is only one teaching skill which is the outside element for the improvement of both reading and writing, while the student's language awareness and the absorbing and construction of the language are the fundamental elements. To improve the reading and writing abilities, two basic aspects should be taken into account: The first thing is the individual's perception and understanding of the world and society, and the second thing is their language capability. Reading and writing are both the communicative means between the reader and writer. With its dual-identity, the student-readers first construct their own understanding of the source text materials on different levels, and secondly the student-writers reconstruct a new text from their own perspective, in which meaning construction is the link between reading and writing (Gebhard et al, 2013). The model can be illustrated in the following diagram:



3. The application of the Reading-to-write Model

To completely understand the Reading-to-write Model, I will use one application of it in my Reading Class for the English majors. The whole process is student-centered, stressing teamwork but allowing idiosyncrasy. In order to know their mental working process, I ask each of them to write a journal to tell me what lead them to choose this topic. Take Lesson One (*Pub Talk and the King's English*) in *Advanced English (2)* as an example, the main procedures of this model are the following:

3.1. Source Text Analysis

In our Intensive Reading class we have a text book, from which we choose some pieces as the source text reading materials to appreciate. Usually the topics are classical. For each lesson, besides the background knowledge, we will emphasize the thesis, language, as well as the language features. Whenever we finish one lesson, the students are divided into groups to discuss about any field connected with it so as to select their own special topic. In this sampled lesson *Pub Talk and the King's English* we talked about the history of English, the differences between oral English and written English, bilingual education and Shakespeare's work *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. After the group discussion, each student is supposed to select one field to make a further reading and compose one paper on that specific topic.

3.2. Extended Reading

Having chosen one field, the students extend their reading to enhance their understanding of it. They begin reading in each field for deep understanding of the topic. The common way they use is to search the internet for abundant reading materials in this field. Taking notes is encouraged, which is of necessity a basic step to everyone. For the group members, they share with each other their ideas on the discussed topics as well as the further reading materials sometimes. For example, the students who are interested in bilingual education start to read in this field to know what is meant by bilingual education and what is the situation in China, which provide them with evidence and support for their writing.

3.3. Selecting a Title

After the extended reading, each student goes to narrow down their topic and work out a specific title for their writing. There is no restriction for the genre in my class, and it depends on the content of the composition as well as the interest of the student. For this lesson, among the 36 students, only one student endeavors to write about Shakespeare's works, which is not listed in the following table. All the other writings are divided into five fields: Bar culture; Characteristics of conversation; Cultural differences; Bilingual education in China; The use of a dictionary. In the following table, we can have a glimpse of all the titles, with the deletion of the same or similar ones.

Bar culture	Story of Bar
	Dinner Table Talk
	British Pub Etiquette
	You Can Learn Relationship from Pub Friends
Characteristics of conversation	Communication and Relationship
	My View on Conversation;
	The Vividness of Phrases in “Pub Talk and the King’s English”
	Inspiration of “Pub Talk and the King’s English”
	Relationships are not Necessarily Based on Deep Involvement
	Communication Skills and Objectives
	True Personality and Purposeless Talk
Cultural differences	How to Make Turn-taking Theory More Efficient in English Class
	The Culture Difference between the East and West
	How to Face the Cultural Aggression
	The Extreme Way of Language Evolution
	American English vs British English
	Accents and the Stubborn Consciousness
	Dialogue, We Need
	Hamburgers and Dumplings
Promoting Mandarin and Protecting Dialects	
Bilingual education in China	Bilingual Education in China
	Bilingual Education: Starting Learning English from Kindergarten
The use of a dictionary	Make Dictionaries Our Helpers
	What You Need is a Dictionary

3.4. Peer Evaluation

Peer evaluation receives some doubts and criticism from both the teachers and the students, however, used appropriately, it is effective (Lee & Lim 2012). It is essentially a learning process because before making their comments, the student evaluator has to read the paper through carefully. What I consider in my class is a clear direction for the evaluation. Generally speaking, three aspects are emphasized: idea, structure, and language. Every time after the students complete their composition, I will use 15 minutes in my class for the peer evaluation. The paper given to them is randomly chosen and each of them is supposed to write a comment on the paper from the three aspects.

3.5 Teacher Evaluation

The teacher’s timely reflection is the last stage of the whole process. Encouragement instead of pointing out mistakes is always my first consideration. Individual development, their mental working process, and their unique ideas are emphasized. Even though it is necessary to give suggestions, I always negotiate with them about my opinions.

4. Conclusion

The goal of teaching English is not just to train the language skills, but to impart culture and enhance the students’ culture sensitivity. So in the teaching process, both western and Chinese culture should be consciously emphasized, which is mainly obtained through reading. Reading-to-write helps the learners to shift from two previous attitudes: Shift from the passive reception of knowledge to an active seeking for knowledge; Shift from the rote-learning of the text to a practical use of the knowledge in solving problems. By practicing this model, the students can acquire the basic language skills as vocabulary and grammar, as well as the abilities to tackle the problems by using the language.

Reading-to-write Model stresses the individual meaning construction process in learning, in which team work spirit and idiosyncrasy of their thinking are equally emphasized. The application of this model in the colleges of China will give the English teachers a new concept of teaching English. The language teachers will accept the idea that reading and writing can be integrated to involve more critical thinking.

Furthermore, they will appreciate the idea that skill training and critical thinking can be reached simultaneously.

However, we English teachers should think about the following questions: How to help the students to select a topic? How to help them to get the proper reading materials? How to make the further reading effective? How to evaluate their writing? This model asks for not only a research spirit and passion but also persistence and perseverance from the teachers.

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