Concurrent Teaching of Academic Reading and Academic Writing: Bridging the Gap

Melodie COOK

学術論文解読及び論文作成の同時的教育

メロデイ・クック

Abstract: 日本と外国の大半の大学において学術的記述と読解は通常別々に指導される。しかし，この人為的に創り出された溝は，他に幾つかの要因とともに，学生が両技能に対応する能力の妨げとなり得る。筆者は小論において現在の実践と問題に着目し，この分野のいくつかの研究を強調したうえで，学生の要求に最も良く応えるべく両技能を同時に指導するコースの開発を議論する。

In a 1967 article entitled "A Second Look at Teaching Reading Composition", Donna Carr wrote about ESL students studying in the United States:

> ...all too frequently we find students who are able to write beautiful sentences but who come up with something unintelligible when asked to compose a paragraph, or students who seem to have mastered the simple paragraph but who explode into a chaotic discourse when asked to compose a full length essay. At the same time, students who can read and analyze a sentence, word for word, but who cannot comprehend the idea expressed are not anomalies in our classrooms. And to these same students a paragraph can be equally incomprehensible even though they understand each sentence. Such students appear to lack the ability to relate the ideas expressed and frequently pick out small, insignificant facts as the main theme. (p. 30)

When I read this, I was struck by the fact that thirty-six years later, I find the same situation prevailing in my classes in Japan. In this paper, I would like to highlight possible causes for this phenomenon, look briefly at some literature and research in this area, and offer suggestions for a solution; namely, the implementation of a course in which both academic reading and academic writing are taught concurrently.

Cause 1: Current Purpose and Practice of English Study

In Japan, students generally study English for 6 years, the purpose of which is to pass examinations guaranteeing their successful entry into university. Although many students do succeed

at this task, the skills they have learned may be applicable, in a limited fashion, to the tasks of academic reading and academic writing at the university level. Regarding reading skills, according to Bamford (1993), "From the beginning of their English study, (students) have been trained to use a single strategy for dealing with unfamiliar language: transpose it word-for-word into Japanese." (p. 64) A problem resulting from this kind of translation is that it can be time-consuming and may limit students to reading only small amounts of text at any given time.

With regards to writing skills, according to Wachs (1993), the majority of students never write in English. "Instead, they translate-words, phrases, sentences, or passages-from Japanese to English and sometimes the other way around." (p. 73) This, too, while necessary to satisfy test requirements, may not be the kind of skill needed when students are asked to do academic writing in English, which may end up as described by Carr (1967) at the beginning of this paper.

Cause 1a: Reliance on Dictionaries

Hao and Sivell (2002) found that their Chinese students when writing in English,

> ...instead of consulting some relevant materials first, (they) rush to a bilingual dictionary to find the seemingly 'equivalent' words and try inexpertly to translate their ideas into English. Thus, they clothe their native-language expressions and structures in English words without realizing that their inexact and misleading words will often be incomprehensible in the context: some words and expressions they choose from the dictionary will be poorly understood or insufficiently controlled in the context. (p. 2)

I have found that students in my writing classrooms in Japan do precisely the same thing, because they have been trained for so long to do so. A similar problem can be found with reading. As Bamford (1993) writes,

> In a university grammar-translation class, the words of an English sentence are each given a Japanese equivalent with the aid of a bilingual dictionary. The Japanese words are then reordered to provide the closest approximation of the English original. Students are called on in class to give their rendition in Japanese, after which the teacher gives a model translation, and in this way, two or three pages of text are covered each class... While this recoding-reordering strategy is an effective way of extracting meaning from a text written in a language in which one has little proficiency, **it is at odds with the process of acquiring that language or reading it fluently** (emphasis mine). (p. 64)

It seems that students' pre-university, and some university experiences of English study require them to rely heavily on dictionaries; unfortunately, by doing so, they are limited in their understanding and expression of standard English structures and vocabulary, both in reading and writing.

Cause 2: Division of Skills

It appears that the skills of reading and writing are taught as separate courses in the university setting, both abroad as well as in Japan. The result of this may be that students do not make connections between reading and writing or see that they are interrelated skills. Hao and Sivell (2002), referring to English taught in a Chinese university, found a probability that the division between the teaching of reading and writing, among other things combined to obstruct the improvement of writing skills. They continue:

> This division prevents the students from being able to profit from a pedagogical movement from reading to writing: that is, the knowledge and skills students have acquired in reading cannot be transferred to writing, which means that each time students start a writing assignment, they experience much difficulty in both language and rhetoric. (p. 1.)

I would argue that the same could be said for students in Japanese universities, or in any university setting where skills are taught as separate entities.

Cause 3: Differences in culture and concepts

According to Carr, (1967) "...for most of our non-native speakers (English rhetorical patterns) are alien, and until they have been taught these patterns, they will have difficulty with both reading comprehension and composition." (p. 31). Supporting this view, Pearson (1980) adds the following:

> ... many of the concepts may be culture-bound and reflect a way of thinking that is unfamiliar, even illogical to our foreign students. A second reason... is that the concepts that underlie what we consider effective reading, writing, and thinking are difficult ones and can be understood and used only with a great deal of practice. (p. 413).

This is a very important consideration. English rhetorical structures need to be taught in such a way that students can recognize them in their academic reading and reproduce them in their academic writing.

Cause 4: The teaching of form at the expense of content

In a 1997 study, Leki and Carson found that in some American EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses, students were primarily required to submit "personal" essays in which the structure of the essay was deemed to be more important than the content contained therein. The problem with this, they cited, is that during their academic careers, students are required to do more writing based on knowledge gathered from external sources. In short, some EAP courses seemed to inadequately prepare students to do the kind of writing expected in their content

courses. Writing without source texts, too, caused students some difficulties, including "...lack of time, of familiarity with a given topic, of information, of ideas, of writing models, or of vocabulary on the topic." (p. 50) This is a general tendency in academic writing courses; I believe this to be so because teachers wish students to focus on the form of their writing, but not necessarily on the content. This may prove to be to students' detriment, as content, in many academic courses, is often seen to be more important than form.

Theories on relationships between reading and writing

Several theories exist on the subject of the relationship between reading and writing. Dubin and Olshtain (1980) devised this early model of the relationship between reading and writing processes in the following self-explanatory model:

THE WRITING PROCESS → THE TEXT → THE READING PROCESS
(production end) (receiving end) (p. 354)

Esmaeili, (2002) in a review of literature for the article "Integrating Reading and Writing Tasks and ESL Student's Reading and Writing", noted three schools of thought regarding the amalgamation of these two academic tasks: directional, nondirectional, and bidirectional. The directional perspective, in short, indicates that "... reading and writing share 'structural components' which can be applied from one modality to another" (p. 603) From the nondirectional perspective, "... both reading and writing are 'processes of interactive and dynamic activation, instantiation and refinement of schemata' whereby increased knowledge in one 'would lead to increased ability in the other'. (p. 603) From the bidirectional perspective both reading and writing are interactive and inter-reliant; following this model, any changes in a learner's reading ability will have an effect on writing ability and visa versa.

Research Findings on the Concurrent Teaching of Reading and Writing

Dubin and Olshtain (1980) found in their research that:

> ...in analyzing the elements in written communication, there is a parallel process between writing and reading that is comparable to the match between speech produced by the speaker and interpreted by the listener. The writer utilizes syntactic, discoursal, and logical devices to encode the message in the form of a written text. The reader must use the same devices to interpret that message. (p. 354)

More than 20 years later, Hao and Sivell's (2002) findings concur with those above. They found that "...reading is closely related to writing in that writing, as a productive skill, cannot happen without reading: reading exerts a strong influence on writing. On the other hand, writing activities, such as taking notes, outlining and summarizing, can also improve reading comprehension." (p. 2) More importantly, they state that "...instruction in the writing process and in reading comprehension can be combined because they are similar in many ways: both focus on helping stu-

dents to think." (p. 3)

Recommendations for Teaching Academic Reading and Academic Writing Concurrently

Carr, (1967) recommended that in teaching writing, the teacher's main task is "...getting students to relate and to organize ideas, and to express them in English paragraph and essay patterns." (p. 31) In order to effectively do that, she goes on to say that teachers should present students with model readings, which should be read analytically so that students can pick out, not only the ideas contained therein, but also the patterns of organization used by the author. In her words:

> ... as writing a sentence pattern reinforces the oral use of that pattern, so does composing a paragraph following a specific model reinforce the reading comprehension of the paragraph which served as the model. That is to say, the organization of the reading selection, after the student understands and visualizes it, serves as a model for the students to imitate in composing their own paragraphs or essays. Thus the pattern is introduced in the reading and reinforced through composition. (p. 33)

Dubin and Olshtain (1980) provide a plan for the concurrent teaching of academic reading and academic writing as follows (pp. 357-360).

Writing	**Reading**
planning - considering the audience	finding main ideas in a text
organizing ideas	locating ideas in paragraphs
developing ideas	matching the writer's plan
using discourse devices	locating supporting ideas
editing and proofreading	evaluating a writer's ability to put the point across

We can see that this plan focuses, however, on academic writing structure, but not necessarily on content. This could be combined, however, with the concurrent introduction of academic texts in subject areas of student interest. Reinforcing the ideas of Carr (1967) above, Leki and Carson (1997) again mention that a source text helps students

> ...because it could serve as a general model, stimulate thinking, and supply many of the resources students complained of lacking without source texts, such as vocabulary, sentence structures, writing style, organizational patterns, ideas, and information. (p. 51)

Hao and Sivell (2002) concur, adding that

> ...introducing reading materials in writing class and giving students reading instruction on them will assist learners in gathering information to support, develop and generate

> new ideas; at the same time, they may extend their lexical and syntactic repertoire by imitation or copying. On the local level, they can imitate the words, phrases, idioms, discourse markers or sentences they have read and understood: on the global level, they may imitate some elements of the content, sentence structure, organization or style. (p. 4)

Conclusion

Carr (1967) notes that "...there is the implication that if [the] relationship between reading and composition, which so obviously exists, can be fully utilized, both the teaching of composition and the teaching of reading can be done more effectively." (p. 34) This will help, "...many ESOL readers [who] have the ... difficulty of a lack of knowledge of the structural and cohesive elements along with little experience with rhetorical styles in English. In trying to help our students become sophisticated readers [and writers] in English, we must focus on all of the elements that encompass the interface of writing and reading. (Dubin and Olshtain, 1980). Hao and Sivell (2002) add that the skills related to reading closely and analyzing texts are useful for both critical reading and with critical writing and that students can learn to apply those skills to revising and editing their own work.

The results of Esmaeili's (2002) research showed three implications for assessment, teaching, and learning. First of all, the bidirectional hypothesis, in which changes in student's reading and writing mutually affect each other, remains the standard view, because thematic links affected students reading and their writing. Second of all, the interactive nature of language was found to be valid. Finally, the results indicated that teaching reading and writing in an integrated manner would lead to ESL students' improvement in both these skills.

In conclusion, if we want to help students overcome difficulties in academic reading and academic writing, it is incumbent upon us as teachers to do so using the best techniques available. If we do so, perhaps our students will become less reliant on dictionaries, and more familiar with the culture and concepts of writing in English. The arguments presented in this paper strongly point to the need for the development of one course in which the skills of academic reading and academic writing are taught concurrently. This may help to bridge an artificially created gap, and aid students in becoming more successful in their reading at writing in English at the university level.

References

Bamford, J. (1993). Beyond Grammar Translation: Teaching Students to Really Read, in P. Wadden (Ed.), A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities (pp. 63-72). New York: Oxford University Press.

Carr, D. (1967). A Second Look at Teaching Reading and Composition. TESOL Quarterly, 1 (1), 30-34.

Dubin, F. & Olshtain, E. (1980). The Interface of Writing and Reading. TESOL Quarterly, 14 (3),

353-363.

Hao, X. & Sivell, J. (2002). Integrating Reading and Writing in EFL Composition in China. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association of Applied Linguistics, Toronto Ontario, Canada.

Ismaeili, H. (2002). Integrated Reading and Writing Tasks and ESL Students' Reading and Writing. Canadian Modern Language Review, 58 (4), 599-622.

Leki, I. & Carson, J. (1997). Completely Different Worlds: EAP and the Writing Experiences of ESL Students in University Courses. TESOL Quarterly, 31 (1), 39-69.

Pearson, C.R. (1980). Advanced Academic Skills in the Low-Level ESL Class. TESOL Quarterly, 9 (4), 413-422.

Wachs, S. (1993). Breaking the Writing Barrier: Approaches to the Composition Class, in P. Wadden (Ed.), A Handbook for Teaching English at Japanese Colleges and Universities (pp. 73-90). New York: Oxford University Press.