



## On the Strategies of Improving Writing for English Majors Through Reading

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### Abstract

This paper mainly focuses on the strategies of improving writing through reading. With the wider application of English, the output of English--- writing becomes more important than before. However, compared with listening, speaking and reading, English writing teaching starts late and improves slowly, though these four skills are interrelated with each other. Among these relations, writing is much more closed related with reading. Therefore, the aim of this study is to clear the influence of English reading on writing and based on this, to put forward strategies and activities to improve the writing ability. This paper is just analyzing the influence of curricular reading and extra-curricular reading on writing, for example, providing the writing models, enriching students' grammar and collecting the writing material. Besides, strategies and activities are put forward from two aspects---the teacher and the student. For example, choosing the appropriate reading materials is an essential method for teacher while rewriting the reading materials is on the student's part.

**Key words:** Strategies; Reading; Writing; English majors

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### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the economy develops quickly and many relative aspects becomes highly commanding, for example, the writing ability. It is at this moment that people come to realize how important the English writing ability is and how poor the students do at this field. Under this high pressure, English teachers attached much more importance to improve students' writing ability than before. And so far, they have made great progress. Many studies have found that writing is interrelated with reading closely.

Writing is also a stumbling block for some English major students to go further. Among the four skills --- listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing is relatively more troublesome for students in China. Problems arise often, for example, grammatical errors, limited vocabulary and thinking pattern and so on. Besides, some students are lack of writing motivation, contents and unable to planning the structure. To improve the writing material, it is necessary to solve these problems.

In response to these problems, numerous researchers have studied theories and method on combining reading and writing and they think that reading and writing are inseparable. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, a large number of comprehensible inputs are the prerequisites for language acquisition. Swain, on the basis of this theory, further pointed that the successful second language acquisition needs not only massive comprehensive inputs but also to produce the comprehensive outputs. The input and output are interwoven with each other. In Curriculum Standard for English (2011), it is noted that language skills include four aspects---listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these four skills, listening and reading are skills of understanding, and speaking and writing are skills of expressing. These four skills are complementary to each other in language learning and communication.

Therefore, an effective way to improve the English writing is to combine reading and writing together. On the

basis of the relation between reading and writing, some strategies will be put forward on the following text.

## 1. THE INFLUENCE OF READING ON WRITING

### 1.1 Curricular Reading

Curricular reading, a traditional English teaching pattern, can benefit writing in many aspects. Through the detailed analysis of texts in the class by the teacher, students can learn to write in a systematic way. The followings are three beneficial influences.

#### 1.1.1 Providing the Writing Models

In Chen Liping's opinion, writing is relatively independent but interdependent with reading. Then teaching of writing, no matter carried in the way of procedural or environment approach, or the consulting or content method, should not ignore or exclude the teaching of English reading which is centered on the model text and aimed at writing. Moreover, as a different reading pattern from other types, the reading of model texts is the best way to combine the teaching of reading and writing together, which is more targeted and instructive. Obviously, writing models are essential in the process of teaching writing. Besides, the teacher's instruction is also indispensable. These two factors can only work in full capacity through coalescing together.

With the help of teacher, students can fully understand the model texts, for example, learning how a specific type of writing is composed. Take a text from a book--*Reading Course* for instance: *How to Read Fiction? A Letter from Howard Pease to a Fan*. Before having this lesson, students may not completely know how to write a letter and what should be written in a letter. However, on the class, the teacher will teach student that the writer should present salutation, greetings, body of letter, complimentary close, signature and the date. Also, the writer needs to write in a strict format. For example, the salutation should be written on the first line at the top of the paper and the greeting words are coincided with the social standing of the hearer as well as the relationship between the writer and the hearer. So is the complimentary close. Since argumentation, exposition and narration are different genres of writing, there are various differences between these writings. An argumentation must have an argument; the expository aims at describing a thing's or a person's characters; a narration is a description of an event or a telling of a story. And all these things could be presented and analyzed through extensive curricular reading and the guidance of teacher.

The curricular reading provides the writing models which can cultivate students' mind except for the needed writing elements. Again, take a text from the book *Reading Course* for instance: *Unit 8 First Aid*. This text

mainly aims at teaching students the basic rules of first aid and what they need to do to support the victim's life like airway clearance. In addition, it presents several emergent accidents such as animal bites, burns, drowning and poisoning and what should students do under these circumstances. Teaching students how to react when they meet an emergency is very useful and practical for many life-threatening situations. But this kind of informative text may be ignored by students themselves because to some extent, it is boring and not as interesting as a novel. And under the guidance of teacher, students will read this passage throughout and can acquire lots of helpful knowledge.

It won't let students down if they follow the reading tips that teacher provides for them. Curricular reading provides students not only the writing model of structure but also the model of content, which enormously helps students to understand how to write an excellent composition.

#### 1.1.2 Enriching Students' Grammar and Vocabulary

One of the advantages that curricular reading can provide rather than extra-curricular reading is the enrichment of the grammar and vocabulary. Students have a great opportunity to come cross the new words and grammar. However, these words and grammar can't be digested and absorbed perfectly if they are learned by rote. Thus the teacher and the curricular reading play an essential role in mastering the usage of these words and grammar.

A scholar graduated from Shanghai Normal University has pointed out that English teacher should help students to enrich their vocabularies first in order to help them to improve their writing ability. In addition, the teacher need help them to build bridges between words because the purely memorizing these words mechanically is useless. For example, the frequently used words "raise, rise" are often confused for their usage to students. The differences between them can only be told specifically under the guidance of teacher. Raise is a verb that must have an object and rise is used without an object. If students encounter these two words outside the classroom, probably they will ignore them. Then next time when they come cross them, they are still confused by their usage. But this situation would be totally different in the event that the teacher will explain their usage and practice them again and again. "The boy was raised by his father." "The sun rises up every day here." The differences are clearly presented by these sentences.

Alike to the enrichment of vocabulary, the grammatical point can benefit a lot from curricular reading. Some grammatical points are difficult for students to understand. Thus they need the explanation of teacher. Otherwise, they won't know how to use it in writing. Take the proverb "after a storm comes a clam" for instance. This is an inverted sentence whose structure is unintelligible for student. But this could not be a problem if it happens in the classroom.

### 1.1.3 Strengthening Students' Abilities of Cohesion and Scheme of Arrangement

An outstanding composition must have complete structure and strict logic. There is an old saying: one who knows his own strength and that of the enemy is invincible in battle. To write a good composition, we need to know what a composition is composed of. Hu Mingzhu pointed out that the reading text can provide the basic structure of the text, present the characteristics of each chapter and reveal the cohesion and logic relations between sentences. The text *Levi Strauss & Company* taken from Reading Course in unit 6 was typically introduced in time sequence. Phrases like "in 1847, upon his arrival in California, after the 1906 earthquake, by the late 1960s, today" are the thread of this text. Another example is also taken from the book Reading Course in unit 11. This text is *Evolution vs. Creation--A Contentious Debate*, which mainly shows the differences between evolution and creation and describes the debate on it. Words like "the first, the second, furthermore, besides, moreover, therefore" are used to present reasons while words like "however, this is contrary to, therefore, thus" are used to against the other side. This text reveals that conjunctions can have great influences on the arrangement of contents, making language fluency. These texts are the models of English writing which uses a lot of cohesive devices and are good at its scheme of arrangement.

But features like this kind of cohesion and scheme of arrangement are often overlooked by students who are more interested in the contents rather than in its structure. Therefore, curricular reading is indispensable in improving students' abilities of cohesion and scheme of arrangement.

### 1.2 Extra-Curricular Reading

Extra-curricular reading, in my opinion, is a kind of reading that happens beyond the requirement of curriculum plan. It mainly depends on the students' interest so it is surprisingly malleable.

#### 1.2.1 Collecting the Writing Material

If one wants to write something good, it is unnecessary for him to merely follow the curricular plan. He who reads extensively must be an extraordinary writer. After reading Jane Austin's most famous novel *Pride and Prejudice*, we can learn that England is a country of rigid social hierarchy, and that English are proud but very polite and that true love is invaluable. These materials would be useful when one needs to write literary criticism or when he writes a composition about love and money. Curricular reading is a stream, extra-curricular the sea. There are various kinds of information that we can't acquire from the text-book.

Furthermore, Don Quixote inspires us the interest in the rise and the fall of knight; Shakespeare presents us the charming of play; Charles Dickens reveals the evil of industrial society. These writing materials are treasures that can be collected by reading widely.

### 1.2.2 Developing the Ability to Think in English in Writing

One of the very problems that exist on Chinese students is the frequent usage of Chinglish. In the final analysis, it is because of the Chinese students' ways of thinking. For instance, students tend to use active sentence rather than passive voice; they like to apply a series of verbs than nouns; they are accustomed to expressing the logicity through contents than correlatives. Such differences between Chinese and English can be fulfilled with extensive reading. As Chen Weijie said that, those familiar words and sentence forms will naturally suggest themselves in the brain while thinking only when we have accumulated enough knowledge and absorbed numerous language materials through reading.

To develop students' ability of thinking in English in writing isn't an easy task. It needs students to hold on consistently. Extra-curricular reading can provide them what they need, such as the collocation of words or phrases, the structure of a sentence and the origin of the figure of speech. Students will be unconsciously influenced by reading, which is beneficial for their promoting of ways of thinking when writing.

### 1.2.3 Learning the Common Techniques in Writing

Compared with curricular reading, extra-curricular reading is a procedure that is up to students' habits. The former is under the guidance of teacher while the latter is independent learning. Therefore, the latter experiences a stricter test on students' attention. And writing, just like reading, also needs concentration. Thus the extensive extra-curricular reading is helpful for students in strengthening their ability of concentrating when writing.

One of the striking features a good composition has is the dramatic start and ending. A plain start is too simple to attract the readers. Hence, to know how to write an impressive beginning and echo in the end is essential. Extra-curricular reading provides a great deal of examples. The writing models of beginning and ending will suggest themselves naturally after a period of extensive reading.

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## 2. STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES ON IMPROVING WRITING THROUGH READING

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### 2.1 From the Aspect of Teachers

A class without a teacher mustn't be complete. Teacher is indispensable in a class. However, teacher was regarded as the controller and the teaching procedure was often teacher-centered traditionally, which over-stressed the teacher's role. Although teacher is essential in students' learning procedure, he is the students' guider rather than the doer. What a teacher should do is to teach students the learning method and guide them. In order to improve the students' writing ability, teacher shall choose the appropriate materials, design writing tasks and evaluate and provide feedback.

### 2.1.1 Choosing the Appropriate Reading Materials

In order to improve students' writing ability, teachers have made great efforts for this. They are the leaders. First thing they need attach importance is to choose the appropriate reading materials for different students. According to the theory of Zone of Proximal Development from famous psychologist Vygotsky and the Input Hypothesis from linguist Krashen, scholar Zhou Xiaomei thinks that the teacher should choose the reading materials that their difficulty are closest to or a little bit over the students' current level, which is the best way to promote students' understanding and acquisition of language, to consolidate the elementary knowledge, arouse their interest and to provoke their thought and broaden their eyes.

In other words, teachers can't use the material which is too simple or too difficult for the students' current level. For instance, the English major students are suitable for the reading materials such as editorial review or the literary works but for the non-English majors the news reports or journal are enough. Indeed, for English majors, teachers should choose their reading materials on the basis of their levels. But the question is how to decide whether the choosing material is just a little bit over the students' current level. One feasible way is to choose the reading material according to the students' vocabularies. For example, if the English major freshman's vocabularies are near 5000, then a reading material such as the international news report is suitable for them while the historical biographies and some famous literary works like *Wuthering Heights* are suitable for graduates whose vocabularies are near 10000. In addition, one thing that teacher should pay attention to is the proportion between the new words and the learned words. Students cannot understand the text correctly if there are over 20% unknown words; most students can't fully understand a text which the new words are from 5% to 10%. And it would be helpful for students to comprehend the text accurately if the material has only 2% new words. For instance, a reading material composed of 1000 words with no more than 20 is appropriate. The excessively simple materials are ineffective input and vice versa.

### 2.1.2 Designing Writing Tasks according the Chosen Material

Different types of reading materials require different writing tasks. If English major students are asked to read a novel of low degree of difficulty such as *Robinson Crusoe*, they may need to extract the excellent sentences and write down their comments on some attractive plots or on the author's first-rate writing techniques. However, for students who have passed the TEM-8 test, the reading materials of high degree of difficulty like *Gone With The Wind* is appropriate for them to write a book review which analyzes the novel's theme, structures, language features and figures of speech, etc. Perhaps the teacher can also

ask the senior students to write an article on analyzing a poem like *A Red, Red Rose*. For the non-English major students, they just need to learn the main idea and structure of reading materials and appreciate the text under the guidance of teacher. All in all, teachers should teach students in accordance with their aptitude, their current levels and their actual needs.

### 2.1.3 Evaluating and Providing Feedback

Among all the procedures in writing teaching and learning, the evaluating and feeding back are the bridges linking the teacher and students. Teachers will get the messages like on which part the students are improving or still troubled in writing. Students will know how their work is going. And these mainly depend on teacher's feedback. Firstly, teacher should pay much attention to their writing content and structure and evaluate whether the writing theme is away from the subject. For example, if students fail to demonstrate his ideas with inconvincible evidence, it would be helpful for students that the teacher specifically points out which part of the composition needs further improvement. Secondly, when students hand their second draft, the grammar, spelling and collocation need to be corrected. It is beneficial if the feedback on such problems is provided as soon as possible. What is more important than these practical corrections is the teacher's encouragement such as writing down comments on good side or presenting the excellent part of a composition in front of the whole class. Sometimes trifle things can count much than it seems.

## 2.2 From the Aspect of Students

It is students rather than the teacher that play a decisive role in improving their writing ability. After all, practice makes perfect. Students need more practice except for learning the theoretical knowledge. Rewriting the reading materials and imitating some well-known works are available choices.

### 2.2.1 Rewriting the Reading Materials

Practice makes perfect. Massive input isn't enough for students' to improve their writing ability. The output is vital, too. Teachers should assign different writing tasks to exercise. Rewriting the reading materials is an effective way for this purpose. Take the well-known writer O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi* for instance. The teacher can design tasks like rewriting this story by putting it under different background, for example, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a little town in China or ask students to write in a dissimilar tense or write in first person or second person. While students finished these tasks, the teacher can know well that whether students have understood the reading materials or not. On this basis, the teacher can evaluate its teaching effect and adjust his teaching method duly.

### 2.2.2 Imitating the Well-Known Works

As we all know, children learn many things just through imitating. Similarly, the development of writing ability

also needs to imitate. On the one hand, imitating the reading materials approaches life, lower the difficulty of English writing and activate students' writing interest the most. On the other hand, it makes students master the language formation and the integrity of structure to help students absorb the contents, transforming the language input into output. The precise collocation, accurate grammar and complete structure of some masterpieces can provide models for students writing. For instance, through imitating Shakespeare's masterpiece *Hamlet*, students can encounter lots of vocabularies, fixed collocation and various figures of speech. All these would contribute to students' improvement in writing.

Imitating news reports can inform students which factors are needed when writing; novels tell the secret of plotting; and poems provide beautiful sentences. Besides, during the procedure of imitating, numerous messages about its culture and history are conveyed and absorbed by students. Anyway, imitating the reading materials is indispensable.

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## CONCLUSION

There exist many problems in the contemporary English teaching process, especially in writing. English teachers still teach in a traditional way without adopting the new theories or new methods to advance the teaching strategies. For instance, teachers are always in a rut that their teaching content is always limited to books. And they never accommodate their teaching to various current event hot spot to interest students in writing. Besides, they attach too much importance to grammatical errors and spelling mistakes instead of the theme, the content and the logic of students' writing. English major students got problems in writing, too. The most obvious problems are the lack of vocabularies especially the upper-class vocabularies and the insufficient arguments.

On the basis of these problems, this paper proposes that teacher should choose the appropriate reading materials

not only the curricular books but also some suitable extra-curricular books, which could help to enlarge students' vocabularies, enrich students' knowledge reserve and motivate them to write. And the next step is to design writing task which should relate to students' daily life because this kind of writing task is so close to life that students can have their own ideas. And evaluating and providing feedbacks on students' writing in time can let students recognize their deficiencies and make up for the lack of ability. As for the students, rewriting the reading materials is helpful for them to fully understand how the text is organized and imitating the well-known works is a feasible way because it helps students to master some skillful narrative forms, means of expression and structures.

Compared with the previous studies on this field, this paper systemically proposes the strategies from the aspect of teachers and students, and pays more attention on the part of English majors. Similarly, this paper also shows the influences of reading on writing, though in a different way. But there is no ending in the way to truth. The remaining studies can focus on the study of how to improve writing through reading argumentative text, through reading expository articles, and through reading prose and novels and so on.

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