

Bridging the Reading-Writing Gap in Second Language Learning

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*“If reading and writing really were identical and not just similar, then...everything learned in one would automatically transfer to the other”
(Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000, p. 43).*

Abstract

Research shows that reading and writing are closely connected. Students who can read well can be expected to write well. However, repeated observations show that this is not always the case. Students who have developed an advanced reading ability often continue to experience difficulty when they try to express themselves in writing. This chapter first discusses oft-cited sources of students' writing difficulties, which typically involve difficulties at the linguistic (e.g., vocabulary, grammar and text structure) and cognitive levels (e.g., selecting relevant contents, connecting different parts of the writing). The next part of the chapter explores the relationship between reading and writing in detail, highlighting areas that need to be linked more tightly together. The last section presents an instructional model that promotes more efficient input processing and focused noticing of linguistic features found in the target text. The model also encourages student writers to engage in writerly reading and readerly writing to further strengthen their writing proficiency.

Keywords: reading and writing connection, L2 reading, L2 writing, ELT

Introduction

To beginning second or foreign language learners, all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing can be equally demanding. This is not surprising as beginning language learners have to acquire a completely new linguistic system that is often vastly different from their native language. Consider, for example, a Thai student learning English as a foreign language. The Thai writing

system is completely different from English so Thai students need to learn a whole new set of the English writing system. Thai is a syllable-timed language, i.e., each syllable receives equal amounts of stress. English, on the other hand, is a stress-timed language, i.e., different syllables receive different amounts of stress with some receiving no stress at all. There are many other differences between the two languages, which can add a substantial learning burden for students at the early stages of learning English.

However, as these learners move up the proficiency scale, they find that the two receptive skills of reading and listening are quite manageable. They become more skilful in dealing with a variety of spoken and written text, i.e., they can read and listen to academic and non-academic texts with a fairly high degree of comprehension. This is often demonstrated by their performance on standardized second language proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS). For advanced level students, it is not uncommon to see scores in the IELTS 8 -9 bands. But the other two skills, speaking and writing, continue to be quite demanding. They continue to speak haltingly and often fumble to find the right words to express their thoughts and ideas, in particular when the topic is quite abstract and complex.

The most demanding skill for students at this level of proficiency is writing. Their writing skills seem to be stuck at the B1 – B2 range and progress beyond this level seems to be very slow and difficult. As faculty involved in screening applications from international students, we have seen a wide range of their English proficiency test scores. The majority have an acceptable overall IELTS score of 7.0 or 7.5 (the minimum requirement for admissions into a graduate programme), but closer inspection reveals higher scores on the reading and listening sections of the test and lower scores on the speaking and writing tests. Their writing scores tend to hover in the 6.0 and 6.5 range. Only a small number are in the IELTS 7.0 – 7.5 bands.

The 2018 IELTS test performance data (<https://www.ielts.org/research/test-taker-performance>) confirm our observation that the average writing scores for both the academic and general IELTS tests are lower compared to the other three skills. For the academic test, the average writing score is around 5.5, while the listening, reading and speaking scores are around 6.0 – 6.3. For the general test, the writing score is slightly higher, at around 6.1-6.2, but lower compared to the other skills, around 6.5 to 6.8.

A pertinent question for language teachers and researchers to ask is this: why is writing lagging behind the other three skills for students at the more advanced level of proficiency? To address this question, we need to examine the nature of writing and explore its key characteristics that make it difficult for students to acquire.

Why Is Writing Difficult?

It is no exaggeration that writing is perhaps one of the most linguistically and cognitively demanding language tasks. It is difficult for both L1 and L2 learners, perhaps more so for the latter than the former. We outline below some of the key characteristics of writing that can place a great deal of demand on the writer (Hyland, 2019; Lewis, 2009).

features and conventions can best be done through modelling, on-going scaffolding, guided and independent practice. In addition, teachers should not only teach the *what* and the *how* of noticing, but also the *why* of noticing writers' linguistic resources.

Finally, there are no standard procedures for solving students' writing problems, nor are there fixed procedures for developing their writing competence through reading. Teachers would need to experiment with different ways of helping students bridge the gap between reading and writing. These involve having on-going conversations about students' writing problems, consulting senior colleagues or writing experts, reading up on the professional literature or attending writing workshops and conferences.

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