Reading Before Writing: A Foundational Skill in AI-enhanced L2 Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how Artifiical Intelligence (AI) tools are changing the way writing is taught in second language classrooms. Since these tools can handle grammar and sentence structure, students can spend more time focusing on their ideas and how they communicate them. To use AI well, students need strong reading skills, especially the ability to read widely and think carefully about what they read. This paper explains why reading is now more important than ever, shares ideas from research, and gives practical tips for teachers. It also highlights the changing role of the writing teacher, who now acts more as a guide—helping students make good choices, think critically about AI output, and develop their own voice as writers.

1   INTRODUCTION

In the past, second language (L2) writing instruction has focused heavily on grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Teachers spent hours correcting student writing, and students often worried more about spelling or verb tenses than about the ideas they wanted to express. However the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as *ChatGPT*, *DeepSeek*, and *Gemini* has begun to transform writing instruction in many educational contexts. These tools can quickly correct grammar, adjust tone, and even suggest ways to improve sentence structure. As a result, students are now free to focus more on what they want to say and less on how to say it correctly.

This shift is exciting, but it also comes with new challenges. Now that AI can handle many of the mechanical parts of writing, students need to take on a new role—not just as writers, but as editors, reviewers, and thinkers. They must make decisions about what ideas matter, which information is accurate, and how to best communicate with the reader. In other words, writing has become more about content and critical thinking.

This paper argues that the skill students need most in this new AI-assisted environment is not just writing: it is reading. In particular, students need to become better at critical and extensive reading. These reading skills give them the tools to evaluate AI-generated text, to decide what to keep or change, and to build strong, original content. This paper explores the current research on reading and writing in L2 education, discusses the impact of AI tools on classroom practices, and offers practical advice for teachers who want to support student writing through reading-based instruction.

2   THE CHANGING ROLE OF WRITING IN L2 CLASSROOMS

Traditional L2 writing instruction has often been form-focused, emphasizing grammar rules, sentence construction, and mechanical accuracy through repetitive drills and correction (Ferris, 2011; McCarthey & Ro, 2011). Writing was typically treated as a product, with the final text evaluated primarily based on linguistic correctness.

However, AI tools such as *ChatGPT*, *DeepSeek*, and *Gemini* have taken over many of the lower-level tasks traditionally associated with writing. These tools can automatically correct grammar, improve style, and suggest alternative phrasing (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). They also help students overcome writer's block, organize ideas, and manage more complex tasks such as generating content or editing drafts. AI tools are now used across various stages of the writing process—including idea development, literature review, and citation management (Floris & Renandya, 2025). As a result, L2 writers can now produce more polished and coherent texts with less effort.

However, this new environment brings a shift in what writing instruction needs to prioritize. If mechanics are handled by AI, the real value of writing instruction lies in helping students develop ideas, organize content, and communicate effectively with an audience (Hyland, 2016). Students now need to ask themselves: Does this paragraph reflect what I want to say? Does it make sense? Is it persuasive or appropriate for my audience? Is the content useful for the readers? Is it factually correct? Are my arguments balanced? These questions are more complex than asking whether a sentence is grammatically correct or a paragraph is linguistically coherent.

Thus, the writing classroom is moving from a product-oriented model to a process-oriented one, where students focus on drafting, evaluating, and revising. This aligns with process writing theories, which emphasize writing as a recursive activity involving planning, writing, revising, polishing and editing (Hyland, 2016). AI, when used appropriately, supports this shift by helping students focus on the higher-order aspects of writing.

3   WHY READING MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

In this AI-supported classroom environment, the skill that enables students to succeed is not just writing but reading. Reading plays a central role in helping students understand and evaluate text, generate ideas, and develop their writing style. There are three main ways in which reading becomes essential.

3.1 Reading for Critical Evaluation of AI-Generated Texts

Critical reading allows students to assess the quality of AI-generated texts. While tools like *ChatGPT* and *DeepSeek* can produce fluent and grammatically correct writing, they often lack depth, accuracy, or contextual appropriateness. Floridi and Chiriatti (2020) argue that AI outputs can be vague, inaccurate, or biased, even when they appear fluent in language. Rahmi et al. (2024) also found that AI-generated writing sometimes lacks content density and coherence, failing to clearly convey the writer's intended message.

To this, Bhardwaj et al. (2024) explain that AI systems rely on pattern recognition and natural language processing, rather than genuine understanding of meaning or communicative intent. As a result, their output may contain logical gaps or misleading content. Without strong reading skills, students may accept such flawed AI output without question. By reading widely and critically, students become better equipped to identify logical gaps, unsupported claims, or poor organization.

3.2 Reading as Input for Language Development

Extensive reading provides students with the essential language input needed to build vocabulary, develop grammatical awareness, and understand how texts are organized. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) explains that language is acquired when students are exposed to comprehensible input, i.e., language that is meaningful and slightly beyond their current level. Extensive reading offers this input in a low-stress, engaging format, allowing students to acquire vocabulary and sentence patterns naturally over time. Supporting this view, Daskalovska (2018) found that vocabulary acquisition is more effective through extensive reading than through isolated, decontextualized exercises.

Complementing Krashen's view, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) argues that students must consciously notice language features in order to internalize them. Extensive reading facilitates this process by providing repeated exposure to grammar, vocabulary, and discourse features in authentic contexts. Over time, students begin to notice how ideas are connected, how tone shifts depending on purpose, and how sentences are structured across genres.

Later studies confirm that extensive reading improves both reading fluency and writing ability (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation, 2008). Park (2016) compared two writing classes—one based on grammar-focused instruction and the other incorporating extensive reading. Students in the reading-integrated group showed significantly better performance in content, organization, and vocabulary.

3.3 Reading to Build Intuition and Authorial Voice

Reading develops an intuitive sense of how language works. Through exposure to various genres and writing styles, students become more attuned to what makes a sentence or paragraph logical and coherent. This awareness helps them evaluate and revise AI-generated drafts and develop their own authorial voice. Regular reading also builds a mental library of language patterns, rhetorical structures, and vocabulary choices that students can draw on when revising AI-generated drafts. Over time, this internalized knowledge enables them to make more

informed decisions about tone, register, and organization. These are rhetorical skills deemed to be essential when collaborating with AI tools.

Wang and Wang (2025) support this view in their qualitative study of L2 writers using *ChatGPT*. They found that students with stronger reading backgrounds were more confident and capable in assessing the quality of AI output. These students did not accept AI-generated suggestions uncritically. Instead, they used their knowledge of language and genre—developed through reading—to identify suggestions that were too formal, inaccurate, or poorly phrased. Some revised content that did not align with their intended meaning, while others rejected suggestions that disrupted coherence or tone. These findings suggest that reading supports more than language development. It fosters the critical judgment needed to collaborate effectively with AI tools. In this way, students who read widely are often better equipped to take on an editorial role, which enables them to assess and revise AI-produced writing.

4   THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT: CO-AUTHOR AND CRITICAL THINKER

The introduction of AI tools has greatly changed students' roles in the writing process. Instead of simply producing text, students must now serve as reviewers, editors and co-authors. They are responsible for making decisions about the content, tone, organization, and overall message of their writing.

When working with AI tools, students using AI must ask themselves whether the AI-generated content matches their intentions and whether it is accurate, appropriate, and well-structured. These questions require not just writing skills, but the ability to analyze and evaluate text, i.e., skills that come from critical reading. In other words, students need to learn how to read like writers and write like readers (Hirvela, 2004; Renandya et al., 2021).

For this reason, it is essential to help students see AI as a support tool rather than a solution. AI can suggest ideas, rephrase sentences, and correct errors, but it cannot think, feel, or understand the writer's purpose. Students must be the ones who shape the message. This shift empowers students but also places greater cognitive demands on them.

The following examples show how students apply reading-based skills not just to check AI-generated texts, but to revise, expand, and shape them.

4.1 Evaluating the Accuracy of AI Writing

While AI tools like *ChatGPT* and *DeepSeek* can produce grammatically correct and coherent text, they may also generate inaccurate or misleading information. For example: "The Eiffel Tower is located in Rome and was built in 1850." A student with strong background knowledge and critical literacy skills would quickly notice the mistake. However, identifying mistakes is only part of the task. Students also need to ask: *Is this information reliable? Should it be verified?* In today's digital environment, readers face an overwhelming amount of content, much of which may be misleading or overly simplified.

As Alexander (2020) points out, reading in the digital age requires students to navigate information overload, detect false or misleading claims, and critically assess the credibility of sources. These skills become especially important when working with AI-generated content, which may present fluent but factually incorrect statements. Through consistent reading practice, students develop the judgment needed to verify facts, recognize weak claims, and make decisions about what to include or revise in their own writing.

4.2 Improving AI-generated Writing

AI writing can often be vague, repetitive, or too simplistic, for example: "To solve climate change, people just need to care more and try harder." A critical reader would recognize that this sentence oversimplifies a complex issue. A student with experience reading academic or opinion texts will know how to improve it. They might revise it to something more precise, such as: "Addressing climate change requires coordinated policy measures, public engagement, and technological innovation."

MacDonald et al. (2023), as cited in Floris and Renandya (2025), explain that while AI tools like *ChatGPT* are useful for generating drafts, they often lack domain expertise. Therefore, students must learn to critically assess AI-generated content, rather than accept it at face value. Extensive reading helps students develop a better understanding of how tone, structure, and style vary across genres. This knowledge helps them improve AI-generated drafts in ways that are appropriate for the task, audience, and purpose.

4.3 Deepening Interpretive Understanding

AI-generated summaries often lack depth and overlook abstract or thematic elements. For example, summarizing a narrative as: "The story is about a boy who goes on an adventure" may ignore deeper themes such as courage, justice, or identity. A student with extensive experience in reading stories or literature can recognize what is missing and rewrite the summary to reflect key ideas. This shows the ability to interpret text, not just describe it.

As Utami et al. (2020) point out, critical reading helps students interpret texts beyond surface meaning. This is especially important when working with AI-generated summaries, which often miss key ideas or deeper themes. When students revise these texts, they draw on their reading experience to decide what information is important and how it should be expressed.

4.4 Recognizing Quality Writing

Students who read widely are more familiar with different writing styles and text structures. This helps them recognize when a piece of writing is clear, well-organized, and appropriate in tone—and when it is not. If an AI-generated paragraph sounds awkward, off-topic, or poorly structured, a student with strong reading experience is more likely to notice the problem and know how to fix it.

Wang and Wang (2025) found that students with stronger reading backgrounds were more confident in reviewing AI-generated texts. These students did not automatically accept AI suggestions. Instead, they used their understanding of language and genre—built through reading—to decide whether the suggestions were useful. Strong reading skills support not only writing fluency, but also the ability to evaluate and revise text.

5 PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

To help students develop the reading skills needed in an AI-supported writing environment, teachers can adopt several classroom strategies that connect reading and writing in meaningful ways.

One effective approach is integrating extensive reading into the curriculum. Students should have regular access to texts they can read for pleasure and general understanding. These might include graded readers, short stories, news articles, or AI-generated texts tailored to their level. The key is that the material should be both readable and interesting. Teachers can encourage reflection by asking students to keep reading journals, where they write summaries, reactions, or questions. These journals can then be used as a springboard for writing tasks.

In addition, critical reading skills should be taught explicitly. Students need to learn how to question and analyze texts. They should be able to identify the main idea, evaluate the strength of an argument, recognize bias, and distinguish between fact and opinion. One effective classroom practice is comparing human-written and AI-generated texts on the same topic. Students can evaluate which version is clearer, more persuasive, or more logically structured, and justify their views. This encourages deep engagement with the text and promotes metacognitive awareness.

Collaborative reading and writing tasks can also be helpful. For example, students can work in pairs or small groups to read a text together and highlight parts that are clear or confusing. They can look at how ideas are connected, whether the tone is appropriate, or if the message is easy to follow. After that, they can read an AI-generated version of the same content and suggest changes to improve it. This kind of group work allows students to share ideas and better understand what makes writing effective.

Incorporating genre-based reading can also be helpful. Students should be given the opportunity to read different types of texts—such as opinion pieces, argumentative essays, formal emails, or narratives—to become familiar with how each genre is organized, what tone is used, and which features are typical. Once students understand these patterns through reading, they can apply their knowledge in a comparison task. For example, teachers can give them an AI-generated version of a genre (e.g., a formal email or argumentative essay) and ask them to check if it follows the expected structure, tone, and purpose. Students can highlight what fits the genre and what does not, then revise the AI-generated text to make it more appropriate. This helps students apply their reading knowledge directly to writing tasks.

Reading should be tightly connected to writing tasks. Before asking students to write an opinion piece or a personal response, teachers can assign a relevant reading to build background knowledge and introduce key vocabulary. Students can then use that reading, along with AI tools, to help develop and revise their writing. This creates a meaningful cycle in which reading informs writing, and writing deepens reading comprehension.

Finally, explicit teaching on the use of AI tools is crucial. Yahia and Egbert (2023), as cited in Floris and Renandya (2025), found that students' writing skills improved significantly when they received direct instruction. Instead of letting students explore these tools on their own, teachers should demonstrate how to use AI tools, such as brainstorming ideas or improving clarity. Floris and Renandya (2025) offer several practical suggestions for using AI in research writing classes, including how to guide students through brainstorming, drafting, and editing. While their article focuses on research writing, many of the ideas can be applied more broadly to general writing instruction.

6 CHALLENGES FOR WRITING TEACHERS

While AI offers powerful tools for improving writing, there are challenges teachers must consider. One major concern is over-reliance on AI. Some students may allow the AI to do most of the thinking and writing, treating it as a shortcut rather than a support. Teachers should establish clear guidelines about appropriate use and emphasize the importance of critical engagement with AI output (Floris, 2024).

Another issue is student motivation to read. If students are not used to reading regularly or find complex texts challenging, they may resist reading tasks. Teachers should provide a variety of materials at different levels, ensuring they are both compelling and comprehensible, and allow students some choice in what they read. This approach, grounded in principles for extensive reading, encourages students to engage with texts that match their interests and proficiency, making reading a more enjoyable and rewarding experience (Day & Bamford, 1998). By offering texts that are interesting and at the right level of difficulty, teachers can help students build confidence and sustain their reading habits over time, which ultimately supports both their language development and writing skills.

Digital literacy is also critical. Students must learn to recognize when AI responses are often incorrect, incomplete, or misleading, as AI tools can sometimes provide information that lacks accuracy or context. They should understand how AI tools generate text, including the underlying algorithms and data they rely on, and be aware of their limitations, such as the inability to fully grasp human emotions or cultural nuances. Teachers can incorporate lessons on fact-checking, source evaluation, and ethical AI use to prepare students for these challenges (Floris, 2024; Floris & Renandya, 2025).

Despite these difficulties, combining AI tools with strong reading instruction provides a path toward more thoughtful, independent writers. With teacher guidance, students can learn to use AI ethically and effectively while strengthening their reading and writing skills.

7 CONCLUSION

AI is changing (if not has already changed) the way writing is taught in L2 classrooms, reducing the emphasis on grammar and shifting focus toward content and communication. This new environment demands more from students, who must now evaluate and revise text rather than simply produce it.

To meet these demands, students must become strong readers. Critical reading enables them to assess AI output thoughtfully, while extensive reading provides the language input necessary to build writing fluency. For ESL teachers, this means redesigning lessons to emphasize reading as the foundation of writing. Grammar and vocabulary still matter, but they are no longer the main focus. In the age of AI, reading is writing.

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