

## **The Integration Myth: Reading and Writing**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There has recently been an increasingly widespread demand for integrated skills materials among ELT practitioners and institutions. This trend has evolved from the communicative language teaching movement that emerged in the 1970s. Skill integration has been seen as an effective way to engage learners as it reflects the natural use of the target language. Integration was first realized in teaching methodology before it started to influence material writing. However, in many cases, integration has become more like a fashion, with no clear understanding about how two skills or more can be integrated in one textbook or whether such integration has made language learning and teaching more effective. This article examines the integration of reading and writing skills in a number of commercial English language teaching (ELT) materials. It first reviews the literature on the integration of these two skills, focusing on the underlying principles and sub-skills. It then reports the findings of an analysis of integration of reading and writing in selected English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) textbooks. Finally, it offers some guidelines and suggestions for how skill integration can be handled more effectively.

*Keywords:* Integrating reading and writing skills, English language textbook evaluation

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article looks into the integration of reading and writing skills. However, before I describe the literature on how these two skills can be integrated, I shall first describe each skill separately.

#### *What is reading?*

Reading can be best seen as a multifaceted skill starting with the decoding of text to the construction of meaning. People often have a purpose for reading. Some people read for fun while others read for information. Regardless of the purpose, good readers engage with what they read. When reading, readers bring with them their knowledge of the topic and the situation. They also use what they know about the language to

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help them parse and comprehend the text. The reader's knowledge of the content and the language certainly facilitates his/her construction of meaning. Readers normally engage with the text and react to the ideas presented by the writer.

Reading specialists have identified sets of skills and sub-skills readers need to have to be able to read effectively. Examples of these skills are skimming, scanning, guessing word meaning and predicting.

#### *What is writing?*

Similar to readers, writers also often have a purpose for writing. There is usually specific readership for the text that is composed. The reader could be the writer himself or herself as in the case of diaries. It is strongly argued that writers produce their best texts when they are engaged in what they produce. When engaged, writers communicate their thoughts more effectively and choose their words more carefully.

Writers go through a process that normally starts with brainstorming then planning and then goes through stages of drafting and revision before the text is finally produced. Some writers go through these stages internally while others, as in the case of foreign or second language learners, are asked to consciously show evidence of the completion of each stage for the purpose of training them in the process of effective writing.

When writing, writers have to be aware of not only the purpose but also the reader and the genre. Different readers and contexts require a certain text type. There are certain

established conventions for different types of texts. Writers are expected to observe and adhere to these standards.

#### *Integration of Reading and Writing*

It is clear from the discussion in the two sections above that there are many commonalities between reading and writing. There are many reasons for integrating these two skills. First, reading and writing are both acts of active engagement through which meaning is made (Zamel, 1992). In more specific, they involve active participatory processes between the reader or the writer and the text. Second, both reading and writing are personal in terms of the reader or the writer. The reader and the writer form and communicate their thoughts based on their own knowledge and experience. Third, integration reflects the **natural use** of language (writing based on a stimulus). There is evidence showing that an interrelationship between the four language skills and that instruction in one skill can enhance the growth of the other skills. For example, reading promotes the growth of vocabulary and language structures that consequently help improve writing. People who write after reading tend to be more engaged in the writing task (writing as a response) (Tierney *et al.*, 1989, as cited in McGinley, 1992).

At the pedagogical level, reading texts can serve as a **model** for writing and as a stimulator and a generator of ideas for pre-writing tasks. Beginner writers who may not be able to compose their own texts normally use the structure of the reading texts for

guidance to present their ideas. The readers' immersion and involvement in the reading text can help transfer some of the 'good' characteristics of good prose to their writing.

Another benefit for learners is that integration can help foster **positive attitudes** towards reading and writing as writing stems from reading and supports it (Smith & Hansen, 1976). If learners see the interrelationship between the two skills and engage in more reading and writing their overall language proficiency is likely to develop.

Furthermore, the activities that accompany reading and writing texts can function as a **vehicle** for helping students shape their thinking and ideas about the topic and the writing task. When students are involved in higher order **thinking skills** such as judging their own thoughts, analyzing and synthesizing ideas in the text, paraphrasing and summarizing, they develop intellectually and become more critical users of the language.

The interaction between the two skills is evidently strong and it should pave the way for integration. In the related literature, there is an emphasis on integrating reading and writing. Campbell (1998), for example, proposes that this can be done in several ways. In academic writing courses, reading activities can be assigned that encourage students to interact with written text. She also suggests that in creative writing, courses exposing students to interesting texts can inspire them to write. In English language teaching (ELT) material evaluation, however, this important issue seems to

have been overlooked. English language teaching textbooks are often evaluated using checklists. Many old and new evaluation checklists are available in the literature (e.g., Mukundan, Hajimohammadi, & Nimehchisalem, 2011; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991). Mukundan and Ahour (2010) provide an extensive review of these checklists across four decades (1970-2008). A review of these evaluation checklists indicates that the integration of reading and writing skills has been neglected in them.

In the absence of clear guidelines for integrations, materials writers use their discretion as how the two skills should best be integrated in the same materials. This indeed poses a huge challenge for authors as they have to balance several factors, among which are:

1. Finding authentic texts and dealing with text difficulty and copyright issues.
2. Designing authentic tasks: time and audience.
3. Balancing engagement and accessibility level of texts.
4. Balancing engagement and practice.
5. Balancing time for reading and writing.
6. Assessment (backwash effect): time and task.

Yoshimura (2009) developed a checklist for helping learners integrate reading and writing processes. The checklist contains questions that guide students through various stages of reading. According to Yoshimura, "[t]he main role the checklist should play

is to guide learners' reading process so that they can learn about English writing from reading" (2009, 1972). The researcher used the checklist to create writing tasks based on reading. The learners in Yoshimura's study found the list useful in improving both their reading and writing abilities.

Smith and Hansen (1976) studied the relationship between reading and writing tasks. Among other things, the researchers found that students showed more interest in reading a text about a particular topic than writing about it. The researchers warned that if learners develop a negative attitude towards writing, this may transfer to reading and that it may not be always advisable to ask students to write about what they read. However, the researchers admitted that task type plays a key role in determining students' engagement. In a more recent study, Mo (2012) investigated the teaching of writing in five colleges in China. The researcher reported many problems in the system and recommended integrating reading with writing as a way to improve students' writing skills.

The objective of the present study was to evaluate five English language textbooks regarding how the integration of reading and writing skills was promoted in them. In order to meet this objective, a list of questions was developed:

1. Are the learners actively involved in reading?
2. Are the learners actively involved in writing?
3. What purpose do the reading texts

serve?

4. Do the reading texts help stimulate and generate ideas for writing?
5. Do the activities help learners notice and transfer the good characteristics of good prose into their writing?
6. Is writing presented as a meaningful activity (i.e. writing as a response)?
7. Are the writing activities based on reading?

These questions would help the researcher as a set of criteria according to which the integration of reading and writing skills in some English textbooks could be evaluated.

## METHOD

This study involved a qualitative analysis of some English textbooks based on the list of questions mentioned in the previous section. Five EFL/ESL textbooks were analyzed for integration (see Table 1 for the list of books). The materials were at the intermediate to upper intermediate levels. The units in all the textbooks tended to be quite lengthy. They were around 40 pages long with two or more long reading passages. The pages were crammed text and exercises with insufficient white space for note taking or glossing on the margins.

## RESULTS

I shall now move to how the five textbooks have attempted to integrate the two skills. As the results of the analysis revealed, in all the textbooks, reading and writing tend to be separated. Each unit consists of one

section for reading and another one for writing. They appear to be like two books bound together without much interaction between them. Moreover, there is usually a long wait between the students' first encounter with the reading text and the writing task. The gap can be 30 pages in some cases. At the outset of each unit, there is usually a set of discussion questions that are used to set the scene and activate the learners' schema in the topic. However, it seems that this engagement is suspended by language-related exercises. The students do a series of vocabulary exercises that aim at pre-teaching some of the vocabulary in the text. Moreover, these vocabulary exercises sometimes appear after the students have read the text. In some cases, students have to wait a long time before they actually see or read the text again.

Comprehension questions take precedence over discussion/reflection questions. Understanding of texts is often oversimplified at the level of answering comprehension questions (multiple choice questions, true/false, short answer). This can make students feel that meaning is something that only exists in the text rather

than something that the reader makes from the text.

When the texts in the reading section are referred to in the activities, the focus is mainly on the word or sentence level (e.g. adjectives, word formation, and word order). There is very little work at the discourse level, something that is essential for the transfer of skills from reading to writing.

In many cases, the students are not given a good or genuine purpose for reading texts. The example below illustrates this particular point:

***Instructions for reading:***

*"This essay was written by Kristin Hunter, a novelist and playwright. It was published in a book of essays in which well-known people wrote about teachers whom they admired and who had influenced them."*

***The text***

***Comprehension questions:***

*Answer the following questions.*

TABLE 1  
A list of the textbooks reviewed

	Title	Publisher	Year
1.	Academic Encounters: Life in Society. Reading, study skills, writing	Cambridge University Press	2002
2.	Northstar Reading and Writing – Intermediate	Longman	2004 (2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.)
3.	Quest: Reading and writing – Book 3	McGraw Hill	2007 (2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.)
4.	Developing Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar	Heinle and Heinle	2003(2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.)
5.	Tapestry Writing 3	Heinle and Heinle	2005

The writing section tends to be considerably short. In some of the textbooks, writing is dealt with on one page. The approach that many of the materials tend to adopt in teaching writing is by first preaching to the students about writing skills and mechanics. This is then followed by practice. In addition, there is a lack of consolidation and direction. In most cases, the students do not know what they will be writing about until they see the writing task. The students do not get enough support for writing except on grammar items. This might be due to the lack of space!

Once in the writing section, the students do not usually go back to the reading except in *Northstar*. The main reading text seems to become distant after it has been discussed in the reading section. The use of the input text is limited to the initial discussion, reading practice and language-based activities.

Shorter texts other than the main text are sometimes used in the writing practice

section. These texts are often not related to the main topic of the unit. In the writing section, students read these texts either to practice writing skills (e.g. main idea and supporting details, topic sentence, conjunctions) or to use as models but not for content and information. In addition, the activities seem to be too diverse and too many. There is a constant shift of focus from discrete language items to discussion questions.

### DISCUSSION

Based on these findings, it seems that the kind of integration that is adopted by these materials can be referred to as *linear sequencing* of tasks and activities (see Fig.1). That is to say, the tasks and activities are presented in a series without much interaction between them.

Most of these textbooks seem to have followed the “transmission model” of reading in which reading is seen as

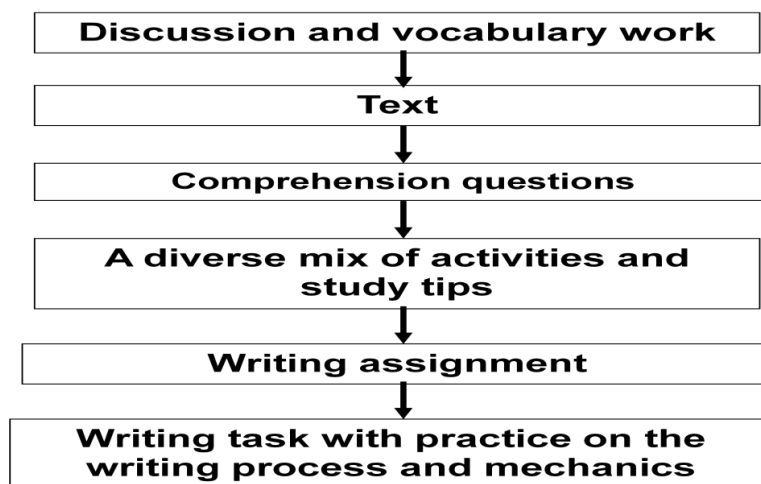


Fig.1: Linear sequencing of tasks and activities

retrieval of facts from a text through a set of “ritualized activities” rather than the interaction between the reader and the text (Zamel, 1992, pp. 463-4). This approach to reading will naturally transfer to writing. Students are led to believe that writing is a matter of putting a set of ideas on a page for the teacher to read and approve. Material writers seem to ignore the fact that the effectiveness of integration primarily depends on the orchestration between the reading and writing.

The way reading and writing materials have addressed integration does not seem to be effective and it might be due to the lack of clear guidelines or criteria for integration. Integrated reading and writing materials, as they stand at present, may be doing more harm than good to both skills as there seems to be a tension between reading and writing development within the same unit.

As Zamel (1992, p. 468) succinctly puts it,

*When written assignments are included in reading textbooks, they invariably appear at the ends of units or chapters, thus reinforcing the notion that writing is done as a final activity after the text has been read, analyzed, worked through, rather than used as a means for understanding the text. We seem to assume a static and unidirectional effect for reading and writing, believing that exposure to reading texts provides models, that reading provides so-called comprehensible input which, if*

*acquired, will later be displayed in the writing produced, that reading provides ideas that can be used as a basis for writing one’s own text.... Thus, reading continues to be viewed as necessarily preceding writing, to offer a paradigm to internalize, to act as a stimulus for writing, or to provide subject matter to write about. With any of these situations we assume that if students read, they will become adept at putting their thoughts on paper. Reading and writing are thus not fully integrated, and reading controls the writing.*

The integration of reading and writing has also been extended to tests. In a very recent study, Yang and Plakans (2012) investigated the integration of writing with listening and reading on an integrated reading-listening-writing test task. The researchers found that learners need to employ a range of complex text processing and text development strategies for successful of the task.

## CONCLUSION

Integration of language skills reflects the natural learning process. There have recently been a plethora of integrated reading and writing materials as an outcome of the emphasis on communicative methodology in language teaching. However, there is disparity in the way materials writers have attempted to address this, stemming from the lack of direction about how skills should

be integrated. With the growing publication of commercial ESL/EFL textbooks, there is a dire need for a clearly defined set of criteria for efficient integration of reading and writing skills.

The present study can have insightful implications for ESL writing research and practice. For example, there are studies in the area that have indicated insignificant effects of peer review on students' writing performance (e.g., Mukundan & Nimehchisalem, 2011). It would be really interesting to conduct an experimental study which involves peer feedback as well as integrating reading and writing skills in its treatment and then investigating whether a mixture of both treatments can improve learners' writing performance. It seems logical to assume that integrating the two skills could result in different findings in such studies.

Furthermore research findings indicate ESL learners commonly commit word choice errors in their writing. In their study of errors and variations in Malaysian English learners' written descriptions, Ahour and Mukundan (2012) revealed that while Malay and Indian learners employed the specifically relevant terms (e.g., daughter), the Chinese students used more general words (e.g., girl) for similar referents in the pictures. It seems true to assume that exposing learners to reading passages in their writing courses will provide an opportunity for them to expand their vocabulary and thus avoid word choice errors.

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