

Reader-Response Approach: An Intervention in Composition Writing at Junior Secondary schools in Botswana

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Abstract

Recently, the reading-writing connection has come into focus as an area that can be exploited to address English as a second language (ESL) writing skills development. This is because various studies have identified ESL writing as being grossly inadequate both at the junior secondary, senior secondary and college levels in Botswana and elsewhere in Africa where English is learned as a second language (L2). Even in situations where English is taught as the first language (L1), the problem of writing persists. This paper discusses ESL composition teaching and learning issues by looking at the integration of reader-response based pedagogy with process writing as a way of improving the learning and teaching of composition writing skills at the junior secondary school level in Botswana. The paper also discusses the implications of this strategy in writing pedagogy and the procedure for its use in composition writing skills development.

**Keywords:** reader-response reading, English as a second language (ESL), composition writing, modeling, junior secondary level, response based activities, process writing.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The difficulty of teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL) in many African countries has been widely documented especially, in the area of junior secondary level writing skills development. Besson-Molcsiwa (1990), Mooko (1996), Chimbanga (2001) and Adeyemi (2004, 2006, 2008b) have written extensively about the problems of composition writing at the junior secondary school level as well as college writing in Botswana. It is important to reiterate that writing skills development is still a big issue in the junior secondary education curriculum, especially if the results of a study carried out (Adeyemi, 2008b) are anything to go by. This situation therefore, calls for continued efforts to address ESL composition writing problems at that level in order to forestall the writing problems students encounter later at senior secondary school and college levels.

**Objectives of this paper**

The persistence of ESL writing difficulties among junior secondary level students has informed the discussion in this paper under the following objectives:

- a) To evaluate the reading-writing connection in ESL composition writing skills development;
- b) To review literature on the reader-response theory of reading, its integration with process writing and implications for teaching composition writing skills; and
- c) To discuss the procedure/techniques of using the reader-response based pedagogy with the process approach in teaching composition writing at the junior secondary school level.

### **Rationale/Problem Statement**

The motivation for this paper was based on some findings in a previous study on junior secondary composition writing (Adeyemi, 2008b) in which it was observed, among other things, that teachers' approaches to composition writing were mainly product oriented. It was also discovered that students lacked composing skills as the type of writing they did was physical, bland and uninspiring. In fact, many of the students failed to communicate considering their scanty writing and lack of vocabulary to express any meaningful ideas. It was also clear from the interviews conducted with the students in the investigations that many of them were averse to writing. Some reported that when they are given a topic to write on, they panic and are unable to write because they either lacked ideas or the vocabulary to express them (Adeyemi, 2008b).

As a result of the above situation, it is the belief of this writer that exploring and strengthening the reader-response based pedagogy to teaching writing skills would help to alleviate, the seemingly intractable problem of composition writing skills development, at the junior secondary level in Botswana and elsewhere with similar problems. This is because the strategy integrates extensive reading, discussions, individual responses and numerous interactive activities with writing. In addition, it would help to build students' confidence in their own ability to be readers, as well as writers. The type of classroom environment that allows for students' responses to be valued in a non-threatening set up, involved in response based activities, would also be beneficial in building learners' confidence and skills.

Furthermore, the revised junior secondary English syllabus (Republic of Botswana, 2008: iii) recommends the communicative approach to language teaching as it states:

The Communicative Approach implies that communicative practice must be part of the language learning process. In order to achieve communicative ability, classroom practice therefore should be very interactive.

The interactive activities suggested by the syllabus cannot be achieved with the use of the product oriented approach of teaching writing, especially, considering the mixed ability nature of the average public secondary classroom in Botswana. It is believed that the use of a response based methodology will ultimately help to improve the learning and teaching of the English language in general, and writing in particular.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The discussion in this paper is based on the premise that learning is accomplished by an active approach. Active learning therefore, ensures that each person process their own ways of learning for knowledge to be internalized. This can be done through the utilization of what students already know and their ability to make the necessary linkages or connections to aid their understanding of new knowledge or information (Piaget, 1970). Furthermore, cognitive development process is believed to be enhanced by active learning techniques such as discovery and interactive activities with others and the environment. This is a view supported by the constructivist views of Piaget (1970) Wertsch (1997) Duckworth (2006) and others who articulate that it is important that students make the necessary linkages between what they already know in order to understand, and then fit the new knowledge into their schema; discriminate where necessary and accommodate where there are differences for learning to occur. The issue here is how to fit all these ideas into the act of reading and by extension, writing effectively.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Role of Reading in Writing**

On writing effectively in English, it has been argued that reading has an important role to play. In other words, possession of the basic skills of reading can enhance the skills to compose and write (Ross & Roe, 1990). Sovik (2003) believes that reading and writing, support, complement and contribute to each other's development. Other authors such as Cox (2002) and Tierney & Leys, (1984) rationalize that both reading and writing should be taught together. In fact, Heller (1995) and Ross & Roe (1990) contend that the processes involved in learning both skills are the same.

Reading or modeling (McCann & Smagorinsky, 1988; Irwin & Doyle, 1992) in writing has been looked at from different perspectives. Meriwether (1997) and Nunan (1999) look at it from a product oriented perspective when linked to extended writing. Adeyemi (2008a) quotes Escholz (1980:63) who defends the use of models in composition writing as highlighted:

Certainly few people will take exception to the general rule that one good way to learn to write is to follow the example of those who can write well ... professional writers have long acknowledged the value of reading; they know that what they read is important to how they eventually write.

Furthermore, White & Arndt (1991) see modeling as beneficial since it explores the link between reading and writing to improve students' writing skills. In other words, reading can be used to prepare learners for more realistic forms of writing. Also, writing activities in this context can provide a basis for integrated learning through reading and writing (Adeyemi, 2008a). It is equally important that this connection does not ignore the use of interactive activities provided by process writing.

The reading dimension of this discussion can be equated with response based reading as well as the subsequent writing assignment borne out of what students have read about and their perceptions of the piece. The students' writing can then be read and appreciated the same way they have appreciated/responded to other peoples' writing as suggestions are made, and the writing and ideas expressed, revised for further improvement to the learners' developing texts.

### **Reader-Response Approach to Reading**

The reader-response approach to reading emphasizes the reader's role in creating meaning and stresses the importance of the reader's own interpretation of texts. It rejects the idea that there is a single fixed meaning inherent in every literary work and holds that the individual creates his or her own meaning through a 'transaction' with the text based on personal associations. It is believed that readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences and knowledge to their reading to make each interpretation subjective and unique (Rosenblatt, 1985, 1994). The underlying theory of this approach recognizes that readers are active agents in the reading process and that their experience, the individual emotions, feelings, understanding and the stance they bring into the reading process counts. It also acknowledges the reader's engagement with the text, the psychological, and the concern with the cognitive, subconscious forces, the social and cultural features that affect meaning (ERIC Digest, 2010). Iser (1978) argues that even though the text in part controls the reader's responses, at the same time it contains 'gaps' that the reader creatively fills. This gap that the reader fills creatively in spoken or written response can be channeled or harnessed by the teacher and facilitator to aid students in composing and writing their views and ideas.

In making a case for the reader-response aspect in teaching composition writing, reference would be made to Collie and Slater (1987) who maintain that literary texts have the potential to provide a rich context in which individual lexical and syntactic items are made more memorable for students. They argue that by reading a substantial and contextualized body of texts, students gain familiarity with many features of written language such as the variety of possible structures and the different ways of connecting ideas which broadens and enriches students writing skills. In all these ways, it is believed that literary work and experiences can improve students' spoken language and reading and writing abilities as a result of the non judgmental and non-threatening classroom environment encouraged in the reader-response process.

### **Integrating Reader-Response in Writing**

Although reader-response is often used for literature, it can be integrated into assignments in other subject areas such as in literature and composition writing where the particular type of creative writing is required. For example, composition writing by nature is expected to be creative and closely allied to the aesthetic dimensions which the reader -response

strategy can provide (ERIC Digest, 2010). In this way, students can be able to find new ways to channel their thoughts and creativity.

Rather than rely on a teacher to give them a single standard interpretation of a text or situation, students learn to construct their own meaning by connecting events and situations in print to issues in their lives and describing what they experience as they read (Mora & James, 2010). This oral/written description of events, reactions, responses or expectations can be exploited extensively to help students put their thoughts and ideas together in logical forms to develop their writing skills. Also, the exposure to different literature genres or texts has the potential benefit of helping students sharpen their reading skills as well as develop vocabulary they so badly need to put their ideas down in written form.

Furthermore, the diverse responses of individual readers and the freedom it allows in a response-based classroom, enable students to value their own views, discover the variety of possible meanings, language usage, vocabulary and grammar necessary to express thoughts in speech and to extend them into their writing (ERIC Digest, 2010). As learners' personal responses are valued, they begin to see themselves as having the authority and responsibility to judge their own writing and see their potential ability as writers, too.

Finally, the social/interactive opportunities of a response based classroom makes it best suited for cooperative and group activities encouraged in communicative language teaching and the process approach to writing. This benefit is articulated by Karolides (2000:21) in the following:

In the weighing and balancing of class exchanges, the students gain insight into the views of others. In this atmosphere of acceptance and honesty, students will sense an appropriate, expressive reading or a limited or misdirected reading; they will measure and receive the ideas of others, incorporating them in their own revising and building their interpretations of the text.

The above argument has implications for students' reading skills development and articulation of ideas in spoken forms that can be explored and extended into their writings. This is made possible as students read model texts, respond and examine those responses by speaking, reading and writing composition drafts, revising and fine-tuning their drafts.

### **Process Writing**

The communicative approach to language teaching favoured by the Botswana government requires that the process approach to composition writing be emphasized so that students learn the language in meaningful interactions and more spontaneous and natural discourse (Republic of Botswana, 1996). There is no doubt that the process has been proven to be of use in very many ESL contexts. At the same time, some of the criticism against the approach needs re-examination. Some of the writing difficulties identified in Adeyemi (2008b) included difficulties with meaning, cohesion in writing as well as inability to express ideas in speech and writing through lack of vocabulary on the part of the learners that were studied.

The above situation has rendered many students incapacitated in line with Johns (1993) warning that most have accepted the process movement without questioning its validity for the populations and educational contexts. In Botswana, where mixed ability teaching is the rule and not the exception in the country's public school system and where the English language is learned as L2, many are excluded from the beneficial effects of process writing. This was also noted by Martin (1985) citing his work with Aboriginal and migrant students in Australia, that because ESL students generally do not have a fully developed inter-language code system, find it difficult to participate in discussions during the various stages of the process approach. This situation justifies the use of the reader-response approach, in which students are exposed to a variety of literary texts and genres, to help them develop the badly needed vocabulary and writing styles, needed for speech and writing skills development.

### **Implications of the Reader-Response - Writing Connection in Teaching Writing**

The type of reader-response based writing coupled with process writing activities suggested in this discussion is particularly recommended because of the notion that learning is a constructive and dynamic process in which students extract meaning from texts through experiencing, hypothesizing, exploring and synthesizing (Rosenblatt, 1985). The above are also processes that writers experience as well (Heller, 1995).

Furthermore, a reader-response approach is often task and activity based. Rather than rely on a teacher to passively pass on information or answers, students learn to construct their own meaning by connecting the textual material

to issues in their lives and describing what they experience as they read (Mora & James, 2010). These experiences, meanings and responses can be exploited in writing assignments to improve students' skills in this area of language learning. Also, because personal responses and interpretations are allowed and valued, students begin to see themselves as having authority and the responsibility to make judgments about what they read and subsequently extend this confidence to their writing. After all, the approach enables them to think of themselves as potential authors who can write, too.

Last but not the least, oral discussions, small group discussions, pair work, journal writing activities, writing logs, free responses which are some of the strategies used with response based teaching are similar to process writing activities that can be incorporated, modified or strengthened to teach writing skills needed in the junior secondary level composition writing. All these, coupled with the democratic environment and attitude encouraged in a response-based classroom are advantages to be explored to solve the problems of the teaching and learning of ESL writing.

### **Techniques of Using the Reader-Response Approach in Writing Pedagogy**

**Reading/Modeling:** The teacher introduces a reading topic in form of articles from books, newspaper, novels, videos, and dramatization as long as it is something that excites the students' interest and is at the level of their understanding. At this stage, a brief introductory activity for the reading can be done such as a discussion or opinion poll of the topic or theme of the reading can be done. This would be followed by a class discussion (shared responses) of questions on the reading that are reader-response based that would enable students to do the subsequent composition writing assignment later on in the lesson. For example part of the questions the teacher can use to initiate discussions on the reading may include:

- I. What sort of person do you think the main character in the story is?
- II. What feelings do some of the events in the story/play evoke in you?
- III. Do you feel particularly embarrassed or annoyed with the way some of the people in the story are behaving?
- IV. How would you have responded (to a specific situation/event) if you were the main character in the story?
- V. How would you have described the situation or reported the incident in chapter two?
- VI. Suggest a title and write two paragraphs on a similar or related event that you have experienced on a character's behaviour in the (novel, play or article) you just read and so on.

These and more, along the lines of the above activities and questions can be modified to improve not only students' reading skills but their spoken and written language. More importantly, a novel, topic in a narrative, play or poem puts a human face to the issues, themes or concepts being discussed and through the reader response activities; multiple interpretations that tap into students' creative ability are encouraged. This can then translate into creative writing and enriched use of language.

Through shared responses, students discern a range of reactions to the topic being read or discussed. This helps to build or clarify the students' own responses. In this process students get the opportunity to identify and reflect on their own reactions by exploring their responses to questions posed on the subject or their feelings/attitudes to the events in the reading. The teacher should be careful at this point so that she or he does not become judgmental or prescriptive. Cross fertilization of ideas should be encouraged. It is equally important that throughout the process, students are allowed to disagree/agree and to write down important information as they deem fit.

From this point, the writing process can now take over as students are paired or divided into groups to work at writing about their own similar or different experiences on the theme of the reading. They are also encouraged to do peer review of their work and necessary revision and editing of each others' writing. The teacher may also provide a checklist to help with the revision/editing before the final submission.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is noted that writing is a generally difficult skill to learn even for L1 speakers. Some of the causes of difficulty in writing include the fact that writing is not a spontaneous activity but has to be learned. It is also assumed that it involves some conscious mental efforts and not just the ability to put words on paper. In consideration of the nature of writing, and the difficulties of L2 teaching and learning, it is important to continue to explore the ways or strategies to minimize the difficulties ESL students encounter and to help them overcome their fear of writing.

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