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WRITING FOR READING

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For some time concern about the writing ability of students has matched the attention given to their reading development. Teachers of all subjects are urged to require their students to write more, and suggestions for helping students improve their writing abound. At the same time we see additional justification for stressing writing; improvement in writing might well lead to improvement in reading.

Why might this be so? Reading and writing draw upon the same bases--language, experiences, and similar processes. Both deal with meaning--in one case obtaining meaning and in the other producing meaning. The nature of thinking required for both causes learners to behave in ways that perhaps are not very different. They use similar strategies to understand what others write and to write in ways that others understand them. Moreover, it is reinforcement of appropriate responses through different but inter-related pathways that could be the more powerful contributor to improved performance in both reading and writing.

The results of research that sought to assess the relationship between and among the language arts offer some support for this rationale (Loban 1976; Hammill 1980; Stotsky 1983). The results of a more limited number of investigations seem to suggest that writing instruction which attends to idea relationships can have a positive influence on reading development (Stotsky 1983). We should note, however, that much more research is needed to determine the effects of specific writing activities on reading progress.

In the meantime, we believe it isn't realistic to wait until the evidence is in before acting. At the very least, the instruction in writing students receive could have a good effect upon the quality of their writing. At the very best, students would improve their comprehension of materials they read as well as become better writers.

WRITING ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVING READING

To read with and for meaning requires students to be aware of and sense relationships. It would appear that writing which focuses attention upon ideas and information and their relatedness could have a beneficial influence upon the quality of their reading.

While other kinds of writing might make a difference too, we will limit suggestions to those that call attention to the former.

Reading to Writing to Reading

In our judgment, one of the productive ways of improving reading comprehension through writing is to teach students to base their writing on what they learn to improve their reading comprehension. The latter depends in great measure on students' ability to overcome problems associated with literal and inferential meanings. Thus, as we help students deal with these, we also have them apply what they are learning toward writing skills.

Let us assume we are helping students to become aware of the ways in which writers organize information so that they might understand and remember more of it. Together we analyze appropriate passages they are reading to determine how the information they contain is related. We decide, for example, that for a passage which discusses how fog and clouds are formed, the author uses a pattern of cause and effect to explain the process. After recognizing the same pattern of organization in other passages (with and without words that signal the nature of organization) and identifying cause(s) and the effect(s), students then try their hand at writing about a topic they know, using the same pattern to establish relationships among the statements. They first might write passages containing signal words and later write others without them. Their efforts could be assessed by their peers and suggested changes made if needed. And then this writing would be followed by more reading.

Similar treatments of reading and writing can be followed for other organizational forms and aspects of comprehension. Reading for main ideas both stated and implied, recognizing essential and irrelevant ideas, understanding anaphoric relationships, noting conclusions and generalizations, using context clues for ascertaining word meanings, etc., all may be influenced by the writing we have students do. Some kinds of passages will be more difficult for students to write than others. But with some reading competence and help from teachers and peers, students' writing efforts should improve. If difficulties in writing persist, perhaps more time spent on reading will be reflected in the writing they do.

Sentence Combining

Another writing activity that seems to promote better reading is sentence combining. When students are faced with the task of including in a sentence ideas contained in a group of sentences, they have to determine in what way the ideas might be related. Once the relationship has been determined, they combine them into a single statement.

Following are groups of sentences, each of whose ideas can be included in one sentence. Time order, contrast, and cause and effect, respectively, tie together the ideas they contain.

- 1) Deciduous trees lose their leaves in the fall.
- 2) Their leaves turn color before dropping.

- 3) Some sections of many European cities are quite modern in appearance.
- 4) Other sections of these cities remind us of medieval times.
- 5) In the Spring the lowlands were plagued by floods.
- 6) Melting snows and ice raised the water level in rivers to overflowing.

Sentences that reflect these and other relationships could be treated. Opportunities to discuss how their ideas are related and alternate ways of combining them while stressing these relationships would be helpful before asking students to write sentences on their own.

Sentence and Paragraph Completion

A writing activity that requires attention to relationships is sentence and passage completion. In the former, students complete sentences from which words have been omitted; in the latter, they provide one or more sentences that have been deleted. A passage such as the following could be used for both exercises. The deleted parts are indicated by parentheses.

Athletes and Extra Minerals *

Some doctors think athletes need more potassium and magnesium than do less active people. Both minerals are used when muscles contract. Both are lost through sweat. Bananas and oranges are rich in potassium, and dark bread, nuts, and green leafy vegetables are (good sources) of magnesium. If an athlete doesn't get enough of these two minerals, he or she will feel weak and tired.

Athletes need more calories. If they get those extra calories by eating more fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains, they will have plenty of minerals. If the athlete isn't smart, he or she may just eat junk food to get extra calories. That athlete won't get the needed minerals that way. (His or her performance during training and at athletic meets may suffer.)

Discussion about the appropriateness of words and statements students supply and their explanations for selecting them will reveal how they establish connections between ideas both stated and inferred.

An alternate procedure could be one in which teachers offer choices for missing words and sentences. After defending their selections, students also might supply others to complete the passage.

Prereading and Postreading Writing

To survey content for general impressions before close reading is one practice that could lead to increased comprehension. A

* Adapted from William and Barbara Franz, Nutritional Survival Manual for the 80s. New York: Julian Messner, 1981, p. 95.

writing exercise that supports such surveys is one in which students develop paragraphs based on the headings and subheadings of a chapter. Not only does such writing require them to speculate about the nature of the information they are to study, but also stimulates them to think about what they already know about the topics.

Students would write as much as they know about the topics, and discuss what they have written. They could verify, add to, and revise what they wrote and compare the way they organized their ideas with how the author expressed them. Their reading could generate additional ideas for which they would write passages to highlight main ideas, conclusions, comparisons and contrasts, cause and effect, time order/sequence, enumeration, etc.

A variety of writing activities which have some support from the results of research include paraphrasing, summarizing, and outlining. Each requires learners to categorize ideas into logical blocks that could help them clarify their thinking. The act of writing forces the "nailing down" of fuzzy ideas, a condition not infrequently absent when we react orally to printed prose.

Other Writing Activities

The rearranging and writing of out-of-order words, phrases and clauses into meaningful idea units is an activity that might facilitate understanding of sentence structure and contribute to comprehension. In addition, there is some evidence that poor comprehenders are not good "chunkers," that is, they do not tend to process words as meaningful units but deal with them individually. In order to rearrange and link misplaced parts of sentences into meaningful wholes, they must use their knowledge of how language works to make sense of them. Practice in writing sentences that give order to misplaced parts helps to make students aware of what they already know. Teachers can call attention to this knowledge when students fail to understand what they read.

Sentence rearrangement might lead to greater chunking. One could select passages from materials students were reading and reorder the sequence of their sentences. Students would rewrite the passages, explain how they decided what the sequence of sentences should be, and match their passages with those the teacher used for study. It is possible alternate reordering of some of the sentences (for example, if the passage contained a stated main idea) wouldn't change the meaning.

IN SUMMARY

There is sufficient reason on both theoretical grounds and the results of research and demonstration to encourage and include writing as one aspect of a program for reading development. Secondary effects on the writing ability of students are real possibilities, the need for which has led to the institution of programs of "writing across the curriculum." Writing for either purpose might benefit both.

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