



Improving the Writing Abilities of First Year Undergraduates through Extensive Reading

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Introduction

Extensive reading is an approach to effective language acquisition in which students read a large amount of materials that fit their linguistic competence “so that [they] can read smoothly, confidently and pleasurablely” (Waring & Takahashi, 2000, p. 6). Nuttall (2005, p. 127) claims it is “the easiest and most effective way to improve [students’] skills” as the reading input is comprehensible and compelling in an anxiety free atmosphere. The interesting and pleasurable content gives the learners confidence and encourages participation. The reading materials and positive attitude allows them to engage with content and this indeed makes them forget that they are reading in a foreign language. This reading confidence is further extended to writing situations as cognitive flexibility of the students gets widened through reading in good amounts (Tanyer, 2015). Raissi and Roustaei (2013, p. 639) claims “reading is a prerequisite of writing and if students cannot read well, they cannot write well too”.

Creating a climate for extensive reading is essential in Indian contexts for the college entrants to meet the academic demands of higher education. Students, especially from regional medium instruction suffer more as they lack sufficient knowledge on vocabulary and subject which are an essential criterion for reading and writing activities. Concentrating on syntactic structures, word recognition and error correction results in poor language proficiency as such kinds of learning environments limit learners’ exposure to language. Consequently, they tend to develop a negative attitude towards language learning.

Improvement in Writing Competency through Extensive Reading

Reading results in the acquisition of all measures of writing competency including content, vocabulary, spelling and grammar by affecting writing ability. In fact, studies conducted to improve reading skills through writing have shown that writing on the text read enhances text comprehension through various processes including connecting relevant ideas, analysing and reviewing the content which can improve reading skills. Also, writing word- spellings increases phonological and syntactical knowledge (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Weiser & Mathes, 2011). Correspondingly, classroom studies on extensive reading have yielded statistically significant gains on writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989, 1990; Lai, 1993; Lee & Hsu,

2009; Mermelstein, 2015; Tsang, 1996). The study conducted by Lee and Hsu (2009) reported significant gains in all key areas required of writing such as content, vocabulary, organization, language use, spelling/mechanics and fluency. Hafiz and Tudor (1989, 1990) and Tsang (1996) found significant improvement in their participants' written language of syntax and semantics. Hafiz and Tudor (1989, 1990) and Lai (1993) reported that vocabulary and fluency developed in writing while Hafiz and Tudor (1990) found improvement in the use of diction of their participants' writing.

The Relationship between Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are interconnected activities involving similar processes of composing meaning using cognition. Butler and Turbill (1984) claim that writing and reading were both "acts of composing". The act of composing is equal to comprehension and construction of meaning (Camille, Blachowicz, & Ogle, 2001). Both for dramatic reading and informational reading, the reader uses the same strategies to arrive at the meaning of the text. The strategies that the reader uses to comprehend meaning involve predicting, analyzing, relating and reflecting. This in fact helps them engage in deep learning instead of surface level learning (Camille, Blachowicz, & Ogle, 2001). In this way, the reader finds answers in the text in the process of finding meaning by associating images, words, and thoughts with the assistance of background knowledge (Zamel, 1992). Similarly, a writer uses his/her background knowledge and experience, along with semantic and syntactic knowledge to convey meaning in the text (Camille, Blachowicz, & Ogle, 2001). Like a reader, a writer follows some strategies such as planning, pre-editing, delay-editing, and revising to gain better understanding of thoughts and ideas in the composing process (Krashen & Lee, 2004).

In an attempt to provide reading and writing activities, many studies have been conducted to expand the language input of students and through which writing ability can also be improved simultaneously. The studies reported that the participants who have been exposed to great amounts of reading gained impressive scores on writing (Attiyat, 2019; Constantino 1995; Mermelstein, 2015; Salyer 1987). Kirin (2010) conducted a study to attain the results of extensive reading in terms of reading and writing abilities among the low proficient EFL learners which is similar to the context of the present study. She also addressed reading in quantities, improvement of reading comprehension and reading abilities along with the relations between wide reading and writing achievements. She also found that reading in large amounts was one of the determinants to improve writing ability. Further, she explained how limited exposure to language input affects the process of reading and writing.

Reducing Writing Apprehension through Extensive Reading

Writing anxiety represents, "negative anxious feelings that disrupt some part of the writing process" (Rankin-Brown, 2006, p. 2). Writing anxiety has a close connection with negative affect which causes writing difficulties. Topuzkanamis (2015, p. 336) defined writing anxiety as "the worry a person feels toward a task of qualified writing". Cheng (2002) categorizes writing anxiety as a cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Somatic anxiety refers to the physiological effects of anxiety including tension and nervousness. Cognitive anxiety is associated with the negative psychological constructs including the consequence of fear about evaluation, fear about grammatical errors and teachers' feedback. When the learners experience high anxiety, they disconnect themselves from writing situations which is known as avoidance behaviour. It is also known as "flight anxiety" which makes the anxious person 'fly' away from frustrating situations (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017, p. 557).

Yaman (2010) observed that writing apprehensions of non-readers were higher than those who read three to four books a month. In line with this view, Zorbaz (2015) found that students who read regular newspapers and magazines were less apprehensive in writing situations.

Reading and Self-Concept Beliefs

A favorable affect factor is inevitable in nurturing positive reading and writing behavior (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). Hayes' (1996) observed that 'motivation and affect' were main predictors of writers' performance. According to Yamashita (2015, p. 172), "greater affective involvement stimulates cognitive processes such as focused attention and facilitates comprehension" since the affect variables such as self-efficacy beliefs, intrinsic motivation and self-determination act as a catalyst to effective development of cognition. On the other side, negative affect factors such as fear, anxiety and shame not only affect cognition but also induce distortive effects on brain functioning by affecting memory recall skill while comprehending or inferencing a text (Bryan, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004). In a similar manner, unfavorable emotions such as confusion, boredom and anxiety negatively impact the composing process by derailing the thought process, causing an aversion to writing (Brand & Powell, 1986). Likewise, lower self-esteem and self-concepts among learners results in the development of negative schema, resulting in unsuccessful reading. In contrast learners with high self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs tend to be internally motivated in pursuing positive reading behavior. In the process they also experience excitement and joy while they read. Precisely, intrinsic motivation is directly proportional to reading for pleasure and the amount of reading. (Becker et al., 2010; Lau, 2009). Such nurturing of positive reading behavior in the early stages of reading development builds self-concept as readers. This in turn is significantly correlated to future reading achievements (Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2000).

Research Objectives of the Study

This brief report analyses the following three questions:

- a) How does pleasurable reading exposure help improve the writing performance of students, especially novice readers?
- b) Does reading input alleviate writing apprehensions?
- c) Is there a relationship between reading self-concepts and writing performance?

The Study

Participants

The participants of this study were 18 first year undergraduate students from an Arts and Science College, in Tiruchirappalli, India. They had completed secondary education in rural schools where the medium of instruction was Tamil. They did not have any reading exposure to English apart from the textbooks prescribed for the English course. In order to score higher grades on tests, they memorize essays provided by the teachers, before appearing for tests. Hence, their language proficiency in English was low. These students were enrolled for their Bachelor of Arts – in English Literature which demands a good amount of reading and only a few had the habit of reading. They were hesitant to speak, to listen, to read and to write in English. All of them were first generation learners. Further, these students did not have an environment surrounded with books, magazines and newspapers at home as most of their parents were illiterate.

Procedure

A pre-test was administered prior to the reading program in order to assess the language ability of the participants. Most of the students experienced writing apprehension while taking the test. To measure the

anxiety level and type of anxiety when experiencing writing, the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) containing a 22-item questionnaire was used. The SLWAI is scored on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The subcategory items were distributed as follows: Somatic anxiety (2, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 19), Cognitive anxiety (1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 21), and Avoidance behavior (4, 5, 10, 12, 16, 18, 22). Five of the items (1, 4, 17, 18, and 22) were negatively worded and required reverse scoring before being summed up to yield scores. A high score obtained indicates a high level of ESL writing anxiety. A total score above 65 points indicates a high level of writing anxiety, a total score below 50 points indicates a low level of writing anxiety, and a total score in-between indicates a moderate level of writing anxiety.

During the treatment period, the participants read the provided materials three hours per week and they continued to read for forty-five days. The reading materials included informative passages and summaries of novels. The number of words in the reading texts ranged from 800 to 900. In the beginning, the participants were less motivated as they found the reading materials uninteresting. In order to raise their level of motivation and interest, materials such as- short stories, summaries of movies and cooking recipes were provided based on the suggestions given by the participants themselves. The simplified reading materials provided comprehensible input and therefore, their reading experience was pleasurable. When they could comprehend the text, it increased their level of interest and motivation which is proportionate to the level of comprehension.

With the aim of motivating learners to share the reading experience with their peers, the participants were allowed to sit in groups and discuss readings once a week. During discussion sessions, participants were asked to summarize their reading text to their peers. At the end of each one-hour session, the instructor checked their participation, involvement and achievement of the discussion task. The instructor also facilitated free-writing tasks to overcome writing apprehension.

The instructor also elicited responses for a questionnaire that was classified into four parts, one each for, pleasure reading habits, opinions about the reading program, reading continuity, and reading self-concept. Questions on pleasure reading habits was aimed at eliciting the amount of time participants spent on pleasure reading. The section “opinions about reading program” included questions related to comprehensibility, and pleasure and interest. The reading continuity section elicited the frequency and persistence of carrying out the reading activity after the reading program. Based on the reading frequency, students were categorised into readers and non-readers. Students who spent more than two hours per week were considered as readers. The reading self-concepts section dealt with questions on reading confidence and motivation.

After thirty-two classroom sessions of the reading program, the students had semester exams so they could not participate for two weeks but later continued their reading sessions. At the end of the reading program, a post-test was administered to identify the level of improvement among the students. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants to hear their views on the reading program and their reading and writing experiences.

Results

The data given in Table 1 show that cognitive anxiety ($M = 27.06$) is higher than the somatic anxiety ($M = 19.44$) and avoidance behaviour. ($M = 19.94$).

TABLE 1
The Writing Anxiety Score of Students

Types	N	Mean	SD	Percentage
Cognitive anxiety	18	27.06	7.2	40.72
Somatic anxiety	18	19.44	5.5	29.25
Avoidance Behaviour	18	19.94	7.4	30.01

The results show that there is a significant difference between pre- and post-test writing mean scores on all subscales. Table 2 presents effect size for all the linguistic measures used in this study. The effect size shows the magnitude or impact of reading on writing performance (Lee & Hsu, 2009). According to Cohen (1988), an effect size of 0.2 indicates a small effect; 0.5, a medium effect; and 0.8, a large effect. The results show a large effect size for all the parameters except mechanics. Most importantly, substantial effect is found for language use which reflects the improved writing after experiencing more reading

TABLE 2
Inferential Statistics of Pre- and Post-test Essays on All Subscales

	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean difference	Effect size (Cohen's d)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Content	5.00	2.91	8.20	5.01	3.20	0.78
Vocabulary	1.18	0.53	2.31	1.47	1.12	1.01
Organization	1.13	0.64	1.76	0.98	0.63	0.76
Language Use	1.30	0.69	2.30	1.54	1.00	0.83
Mechanics	1.16	0.60	1.35	0.44	0.19	0.36

The results reveal that reading self-concepts were significantly correlated with writing performance (i.e. readers, $r = 0.777^{**}$, $p = 0.008$, $n = 10$; non-readers, $r = 0.881$, $p = 0.004$, $n = 8$). The scores of reader self-concepts were correlated with their writing performance. The non-readers scored less on both reading self-concept and writing performance.

TABLE 3
Pearson Correlation between Reading Self-concepts and Writing Performance of Readers and Non-readers

		WP	
		Pearson Correlation	0.777**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
		N	10
		WP	
Non-readers	RS	Pearson Correlation	0.881
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004
		N	8

(RS-Reading Self-Concepts; WP-Writing Performance)

Discussion

The results of the writing anxiety questionnaire indicated that Cognitive Anxiety (41%) is the prevailing type of writing anxiety found amongst participants that inhibited writing the most. Students who experienced high anxiety were afflicted with negative emotions such as confusion, boredom and stress prevented them from accessing appropriate information and linguistic constructs from memory. Further, the negative psychological constructs such as fear about evaluation, worries about getting poor grades, fear about spelling and grammatical errors may have hindered their composing process. Consequently, they performed poorly and their written composition consisted of irrelevant content and unfit grammatical patterns. After the treatment period, their apprehension was less as reading introduced them to a variety of sentence structures and written expressions. Their written constructs appeared to be better in terms of vocabulary and the arrangement of ideas compared to the posttest essays as they were

more familiar with the topical knowledge and linguistic properties. A few sample sentences from their writings are given below:

Student 1:

I love my family and my parents and I love my younger sister, neighbors. My house is very beautiful, my father native place. (Pre-test)

My village has five beautiful ponds. And it is surrounded by mountains and gardens and it is shadowed with coconut trees. Also, it is called as lemon-city. Agriculture is the occupation. And it is a cool place. (Post-test)

Student 2:

Behind my house there was a river. The river was look like black and the water is very impured. (Pre-test)

There is a river behind my house. The river was very dirty. (Post-test)

The scores obtained by the participants in pre- and post-tests reinforces that the participants who already started their reading were good comprehenders and they performed better than poor comprehenders on all writing subscales such as content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. It was observed that participants showed significant improvement in comprehension, cognition, writing style and fluency. Incidental attention on new vocabulary extended their knowledge through guessing the meaning of words by fitting in the context, provided the text was comprehensible. Reading practice produced a strong impact on the acquisition of new vocabulary, which is consistent with studies on the incidental acquisition of vocabulary (e.g., Ponniah, 2011) which state that learners acquire meaning of words incidentally and they use them in real situations. Further, continuous exposure to words in context will enhance the usage of vocabulary and paves the way to better acquisition of lexis and syntax, signaling the acquisition of grammar alongside the meaning (Ponniah, 2011).

The results corroborated the fact that the development of writing skills is correlated to the amount of comprehensible reading input. This explains those who had reading habit engaged in better comprehension than the participants who never read as they felt that the reading materials do not fit within their linguistic competence. Readers could perform better partly owing to the pleasurable experience they experienced while reading. During the initial sessions of the program, non-readers experienced hardship in decoding the meaning from the text. Further, the reading was not a rewarding or compelling experience for non-readers because of the delay they experienced in automaticity and word recognition (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). However, nonreaders too acquired language, though only proportionate to the comprehensible input they had received.

The improved comprehension skills of all participants including non-readers implies that they decode meaning from context, which suggests an indirect acquisition of lexical, semantic and schematic knowledge since vocabulary, linguistic and background knowledge are the key factors that determine reading achievement. These three factors (vocabulary, linguistic and background knowledge) help in improving cognitive process, which in turn helps participants form a coherent mental representation of text.

Further, shared reading experience provides a fertile ground to nurture thoughts and verbalize them in an anxiety-free situation, which enables the incidental acquisition of vocabulary. This further pushed the participants to read more since sharing induces a pleasurable experience to the learning process. This motivated the participants to choose the books that interest them and it made reading more comprehensible as they seek background information about the book before they read.

Motivational aspects pave the way to the rise of self-concept among the participants with the support of positive reading and writing experiences. The anxiety-free environment along with the materials that matched their linguistic proficiency built their confidence to read and write. It was clear from one-on-one interview results that, some of them started to read extended texts such as novels, magazines and regular

newspapers. The developmental self-concepts aids students to set goals and aspirations, to persevere, and to work in that direction. Research also reports that students with higher self-concept beliefs are less anxious and highly comfortable in reading and writing tasks. Thus, higher self-efficacy correlates to self-regulated reading behavior along with the pleasure derived through reading and writing activities.

Conclusion

This study was conducted among reluctant readers who had only a little exposure to English. The amount of reading done by the students of this study was less compared to that of the subjects of other studies of extensive reading due to their limited language proficiency. Further, the extensive reading researchers claimed that the longer the duration of reading, the higher the language proficiency. However, the study shows the participants' gains on written scores were reasonable in proportion to the comprehensible input that they received. Moreover, they built their confidence to read extended texts on their own. The enhanced cognitive flexibility through reading lead them to compose essays on their own. Further, writing assignments on the material read had a positive impact on students' writing, reading and thinking. Also, writing integrated with more reading made the composing process easier. It was notable that the writing intervention provided here strengthened the students' reading skills. In fact, it resulted in shaping students' thinking skills and composing knowledge on writing as well. In addition, the study proved that students had attained semantic knowledge to a greater extent compared to the other linguistic components as a result of reading exposure. Frequent writing practices had produced greater reading gains. However, this study had limitations that should be recognized while interpreting the results and it did not guarantee that writing intervention in reading classes will be effective to improve students for all other situations since it has been conducted with a relatively small sample of college freshmen. Additional studies with a bigger sample size would be beneficial. Moreover, one possible speculative explanation of the researcher is, results may depend on the role of other variables including individual differences of students, their previous exposure to language inputs, their reading and writing experiences, instructional arrangements, material resources in the classroom, teachers' beliefs on teaching and evaluation. Further, most importantly research on writing to improve reading has been declining over the years. Graham and Herbert (2011) have shown in their study that "Forty-one percent of the studies reviewed were conducted in the 1980s, 24 percent in the 1990s, and 15 percent after the millineum". Hence, it is clear that this area requires more investigations.

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