

IMPROVING ACADEMIC WRITING PERFORMANCE FOR ENGLISH MAJORS THROUGH INTENSIVE READING

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SUMMARY

At tertiary level, academic writing has always been more crucial for English majors. Therefore, students need appropriate guidance to develop their writing ability. Indeed, making connections between intensive reading and academic writing is an effective way to enhance language proficiency since reading is input and writing is output. In addition, combining intensive reading-academic writing provides students with opportunities to think logically, organize their thoughts and share their knowledge. As can be seen from the results of some academic writing tests at Thai Nguyen University of Education, a large number of teachers complain about English majors' incapability to organize their ideas logically, their lack of appropriate information to cover topics, their limited vocabulary, their structure and spelling mistakes, and their writing patterns. Furthermore, English majors of TNU also complain about being unable to write professionally - the students cannot express cogently in English while doing any academic writing. As a result, the ultimate objective of the study is to investigate the impacts of intensive reading on the students' writing performance. The focus of the investigation is on the influence of the amount of language input provided for students on their academic writing performance. Moreover, this study has an intention to figure out how to exploit intensive reading effectively with a view to enhancing students' academic writing performance.

Keywords: *intensive reading; academic writing performance; English majors; language input; writing skill*

INTRODUCTION

In intensive reading, students read texts which are more complicated with regard to content and language than those utilized for extensive reading. According to Macalister (2011) [1], instructors should concentrate on reading skills such as guessing the meaning of words or phrases and figuring out the main idea. This helps students to understand the meaning of the whole text. In sum, Macalister (2011) [1] assumes that there are four learning objectives of intensive reading. They are: (i) concentrating on new language like vocabulary and grammar; (ii) concentrating on ideas such as topics and themes; (iii) improving new sub-skills such as making inferences and finding out main ideas; (iv) and taking notice of text features such as genre structure, cohesion and coherence.

In previous centuries, reading was the primary concentration rather than writing. For instance, in the eighteenth and the nineteenth

centuries, Tribble (1996) [2] claimed that most of people read the text in which they can be supplied instructions and can be educated into a special ideology. However, writing is attributed to give instructions and form viewpoints about the society. In general, over the past years, both reading and writing skills were considered as isolated skills since reading was passive and writing was active. On the other hand, these two skills are somehow interconnected and may be closely promoted. According to Johnson (2008) [3], the relationship between these two language skills is that reading facilitates learners to write professionally. This is because learners are supplied with rules of grammar and vocabulary while reading, so they improve the language structure, grammar and enrich their vocabulary. To put it simply, reading in the classroom is regarded as suitable input for attainment of writing skill. Eisterhold (1990) [4] claims that reading the text is considered as a main model for which writing skill can be learned or made inference.

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Stotsky (1983) [5] believes that there is a close correlation between reading and writing. He points out the following ideas:

- There is a connection between reading attainment and writing performance. In fact, better writers tend to become better readers.
- There is a connection between writing performance and reading experience. Actually, better writers read more than poor writers.
- There is a connection between reading competency and measure of syntactic complication in writing. Indeed, better readers produce more syntactically nature writing than poor readers.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This research aims to develop students' academic writing performance through intensive reading. The focus of the investigation is on the influence of the amount of language input provided for students on their academic writing performance. Furthermore, this study has an intention to figure out how to exploit intensive reading effectively with a view to enhance students' academic writing performance.

METHODOLOGY

The research has been conducted based on mixed methods because it combines experimental method, qualitative method (observation checklists) and quantitative method (questionnaires and T-tests).

The participants of this study are 20 second-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education, who were selected at random, and then based on the pre-test, put into 2 groups: experimental group and control group on a condition that the both groups' level of English proficiency is balance. Another group of participants are 5 English teachers of writing chosen purposively to complete the questionnaire.

Regarding the procedure for collecting data, firstly, all the 20 selected students were required to do a pre-test in the format of IELTS Writing Task 2 with the aim to inform the researcher about the problems in learners' academic writing and their strengths in

academic writing to design lesson plans appropriately and to put students into the experimental group and the control group.

Pre-questionnaires were delivered to both teachers and students to investigate their experience, difficulties, methods, techniques, opinions related to academic writing; all of this information helps the researcher design effective lesson plans for the experimental class.

Then, the researcher carried out experimental teaching with 2 groups: experimental group (studying with intensive reading) and control group (studying without intensive reading). Five lessons associated with different topics were delivered to the two groups. During the lessons, classroom observation was conducted by the teacher for more authentic information. The observation checklist was utilized to observe the learning processes and to take a record of the classroom activities during the implementation of the actions. It consisted of the way the teacher conducted their lesson, how students' attitude was in the class, what interaction students were during the lessons and what atmosphere there was in the class.

After each lesson, the researcher collected and evaluated students' writing paper as a post-test in order to figure out how much their progress is and find out the differences between the two group' results.

Finally, a post-questionnaire was delivered to the experimental group to collect data regarding learners' experience of academic writing, their attitude to academic writing through using intensive reading and their suggestions to improve the effectiveness of using intensive reading in writing performance.

All of the data collected were coded, analyzed and compared between the experimental group and the control group.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' pre-test scores in the experimental and control group

Table 1 indicates the accurate band score by an average student in the writing pre-test of both groups. It can be seen that the average band score of the experimental and traditional

group is 5.65 and 5.6 respectively. In other words, both groups' level of writing proficiency is almost similar.

Table 1. *The average band score in the pre-test of the experimental and control group*

| | The experimental group | The control group |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Total number of participants | 10 | 10 |
| Total number of band scores | 56.5 | 56 |
| The average band score | 5.65 | 5.6 |

Students' post-test scores in the experimental and control group

Table 2. *The average band score in the post-test of the experimental and control group*

| | Experimental group | Control group |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Post-test 1 | 6.20 | 5.75 |
| Post-test 2 | 6.55 | 5.85 |
| Post-test 3 | 6.60 | 5.90 |
| Post-test 4 | 6.70 | 5.85 |
| Post-test 5 | 6.85 | 5.80 |
| The average band score | 6.58 | 5.83 |

Table 2 shows the accurate band score by an average student of both groups. For a deeper analysis, the researcher calculates the accurate band score by an average student by dividing the total number of band scores by 6- the number of writing papers. Generally, the average band score of the experimental group in the post-test is 6.58. However, the average band score of the traditional group is only 5.83 although both groups' level of proficiency before the experiment is quite similar. To put it another way, the average band score in the control group is lower than that of experimental group. This proves that intensive reading has a positive effect on learners' writing performance.

The learning outcome of each participant in the experimental and control groups

It is visible in table 3 and 4 that all of the students made a gradual improvement in academic writing. It is noticeable that there is

a big difference between pre-test scores and post-test scores of the participants in the experimental group while there is an insignificant gap between pre-test scores and post-test scores of the 10 students in the control group. This demonstrates that although the experiment was implemented in only three weeks, the participants' academic writing competence is improved when learning intensive reading. In the traditional classroom group, the improvement in writing performance is unremarkable.

Table 3. *The learning outcome of each participant in the experimental group*

| Participant | Pre-test | Post-test 1 | Post-test 2 | Post-test 3 | Post-test 4 | Post-test 5 | Average |
|-------------|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 7.5 | 7 | 7.5 | 7.00 |
| 2 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 6 | 6 | 6.5 | 6 | 5.92 |
| 3 | 7 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 7.5 | 8 | 7.50 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6.5 | 5.92 |
| 5 | 4.5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6.5 | 7 | 5.83 |
| 6 | 4 | 5.5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5.58 |
| 7 | 6.5 | 7 | 7 | 7.5 | 7 | 7.5 | 7.08 |
| 8 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 6 | 6 | 6.5 | 6 | 5.92 |
| 9 | 6 | 6.5 | 7 | 6.5 | 7 | 7 | 6.67 |
| 10 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 6.83 |

Table 4. *The learning outcome of each participant in the control group*

| Participant | Pre-test | Post-test 1 | Post-test 2 | Post-test 3 | Post-test 4 | Post-test 5 | Average |
|-------------|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | 6 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.4 |
| 2 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 6 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.6 |
| 3 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 |
| 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 5.2 |
| 5 | 4 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.4 |
| 6 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.2 |
| 7 | 6.5 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7.5 | 7 | 7 |
| 8 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 |
| 9 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 7 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.6 |
| 10 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 7 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.6 |

Students' preference of using intensive reading in academic writing

Data from the post-questionnaire

In the post-questionnaire, the researchers asked students in the experimental group about their attitude towards using intensive reading before writing an academic essay. All of the participants stated that they find it easy to do any academic writing through intensive reading. They can get ideas, vocabulary and structures from the reading text to apply in their writing papers. Besides, 100% of the participants claimed that they appreciate this method and they are totally excited about it because intensive reading helps students enhance writing competency.

Most of the students in the experimental group (80%) also hoped that their teacher would utilize intensive reading to teach them academic writing at school regularly.

Data from the classroom observation checklist

Based on the researcher's observation recorded in the checklist, students of the experimental class had positive reactions in the class: listening to the instructions, understanding directions, working independently and understanding the concepts represented. Similar to the experimental group, students in the traditional group also had a positive attitude. For example, they listened to the teacher, understood directions, worked independently and understood the concepts given. Nevertheless, they were usually distracted and sometime talked in class. In terms of interaction during the lessons, students in the experimental were cooperative with teachers as they followed the teacher's instructions. Furthermore, students were more excited to join in group work and discussed the topic of the lesson. As a result, they interacted well with each other in the process of discussion. On the contrary, several students in the traditional class usually avoided working in pairs or in groups. Moreover, they were sometimes not excited to answer the teacher's questions. With regard

to the atmosphere in the class, students were happy and interested in the lesson. This is the reason why students in the experimental group were enthusiastic to participate in pair-work or group-work as well as raised their hands to answer the teacher's questions. Unlike the experimental group, some students in the traditional group looked bored with yawns in all of the 5 lessons, but a few of them were still excited because they have already learnt the subject matter in the same way before.

In conclusion, by analyzing the questionnaire responses gathered and the researchers' observation recorded in the checklist, the researchers realize that the new method stimulates students' interest and desire to learn academic writing.

Advantages of intensive reading in academic writing identified by teachers and students

Table 5. *Advantages of using intensive reading in academic writing*

| Advantage | Teacher Student | |
|--|-----------------|------|
| | % | % |
| It will be easier for learners to get ideas | 100% | 100% |
| It helps students focus on grammatical form and understand literal meaning, implication, rhetorical and the like | 60% | 80% |
| It will be easier for learners to extend knowledge of vocabulary and idioms | 100% | 100% |
| Learners will learn how to express in the text | 80% | 60% |
| Learners will be motivated in academic writing | 60% | 60% |

Based on the perspectives of both teachers and students, the primary advantages of using intensive reading in academic writing are to get ideas and enrich vocabulary and idioms for learners. As a result, teachers should apply intensive reading in teaching students academic writing at school so that learners can improve their writing performance.

Teachers' and students' suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of using intensive reading in academic writing

Table 6. Suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of intensive reading in academic writing

| Suggestion | Teacher % | Student % |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Teachers should plan lessons by choosing which abilities, core content and knowledge requirements in accordance with the curriculum. | 100% | 80% |
| Teachers should give students examples from each genre to create a pre-understanding among students. | 60% | 80% |
| Some kinds of formative assessment should be made. | 100% | 30% |

From the perspectives of both teachers and students, the primary solution to improve the effectiveness of using intensive reading in academic writing is that teachers should plan lessons by choosing which abilities, core content and knowledge requirements in accordance with the curriculum. An additional solution of this problem is that teachers should give students examples from each genre to create a pre-understanding among students. While all of the teachers claimed that some kind of formative assessment by teachers and students should be made, only a few students agree this solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

The results from the questionnaires, writing tests and observation checklists manifest significant benefits of using intensive reading; however, some shortcomings were also noticed. Below are some recommendations for teachers to improve the quality of using intensive reading to teach academic writing in class.

Teachers should provide students with informative and motivating reading texts

The reading text should be not only informative but also challenging and exciting

enough to motivate students to read and make the best use of the text in their writing.

Teachers should provide their English majors with a full account of intensive reading

Teachers should give a full knowledge of the reading text before asking students to practice writing an essay on a particular topic like ideas, vocabulary, useful expressions or format of each type of academic writing. Furthermore, teachers ought to make use of the reading materials and activities which will arouse learners' motivation and develop their writing skill.

Teachers should encourage students to find the reading text themselves and share with their peers

Besides the reading texts provided by the teachers, students themselves can find reading resources and share them with their classmates. By doing so, students can accumulate a variety of reading texts on various topics. They may also become more independent and active in learning.

Encourage more practice

Another important recommendation is that students should be encouraged to practice reading and writing more in class and at home, individually, in pairs and in groups. In this way, both their reading skills, vocabulary, grammar and writing skills will be improved on a daily basis.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it is necessary to have an overview about the use of intensive reading to facilitate the teaching and learning of English academic writing. The results collected by questionnaires, T-tests and observation checklists can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, there is a big difference between pre-test score and post-test score of the participants in the experimental group while there is an insignificant gap between pre-test score and post-test scores of the students in the traditional group. This demonstrates that the participants' academic writing

competence is improved better when learning intensive reading compared with the traditional group.

Secondly, teachers' perspectives are consistent with students' perspectives on aspects of the problems such as the difficulties, the techniques applied in academic writing, the advantages and disadvantages of using intensive reading in writing, and suggestions to improve the effectiveness of utilizing intensive reading in academic writing.

Finally, by analyzing students' questionnaire responses and observing the classroom, the researcher realizes that the new method stimulates students' interest and desire to learn academic writing.

Hopefully, our study might be helpful for students and teachers to develop academic writing' performance.

TÓM TẮT

SỬ DỤNG HÌNH THỨC ĐỌC CHUYÊN SÂU ĐỂ NÂNG CAO KHẢ NĂNG VIẾT HỌC THUẬT CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH

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Ở bậc đại học, viết học thuật rất quan trọng đối với sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Vì vậy, sinh viên cần có sự hướng dẫn thích hợp để phát triển khả năng viết của mình. Quả thật, việc kết nối giữa hình thức đọc chuyên sâu và viết học thuật là một cách hiệu quả để nâng cao mức độ sử dụng thành thạo ngôn ngữ vì đọc là để tích lũy kiến thức và viết là để sản sinh ra kiến thức. Ngoài ra, việc kết hợp giữa hình thức đọc hiểu chuyên sâu và viết học thuật cung cấp cho sinh viên cơ hội tư duy lô-gic, sắp xếp các ý tưởng và chia sẻ kiến thức của mình. Kết quả khảo sát ý kiến và đánh giá một số bài kiểm tra kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh học thuật tại trường Đại học Sư phạm - ĐH Thái Nguyên cho thấy nhiều sinh viên chuyên ngữ không thể sắp xếp ý tưởng một cách hợp lý, thiếu thông tin phù hợp để viết về các chủ đề, thiếu từ vựng, cấu trúc và mắc nhiều lỗi chính tả, ngữ pháp cũng như diễn đạt. Vì vậy, mục đích của nghiên cứu là để điều tra những ảnh hưởng của hình thức đọc chuyên sâu đến khả năng viết học thuật của sinh viên chuyên ngữ. Trọng tâm của cuộc điều tra là xem xét mức độ ảnh hưởng của đầu vào ngôn ngữ được cung cấp cho sinh viên thông qua hình thức đọc chuyên sâu để nâng cao khả năng viết học thuật. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu còn tìm hiểu cách khai thác hiệu quả hình thức đọc chuyên sâu nhằm nâng cao khả năng viết học thuật cho sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: *đọc chuyên sâu; khả năng viết học thuật; sinh viên chuyên ngữ; đầu vào ngôn ngữ; kỹ năng viết*

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