

Two Writing Activities for Extensive Reading

IN *EXTENSIVE READING*, STUDENTS SELECT THEIR OWN BOOKS AND READ A GREAT deal at their own pace. They are encouraged to read easy and interesting books and to stop reading a book if it is too hard, too easy, or boring. Generally, students do not answer comprehension questions on the books they have read.

When beginning and intermediate adult and adolescent learners of English read extensively, by far the most suitable reading materials are books, magazines, and newspapers especially written for EFL learners. This language learner literature is being published in growing quantity, variety, and sophistication by both local and global publishers. Such publications are usually called graded readers. There are hundreds of attractive fiction and nonfiction books appropriate to students of various ages and interests, including folk tales and science fiction, thrillers adapted from best-selling writers like John Grisham, classics, travel guides, and novels based on popular movies or TV shows such as *Baywatch*. Titles of books are listed in the catalogs of such publishers as Oxford University Press, Longman (Penguin), and Heinemann.

When my students have finished reading a book, I do not give them comprehension questions or test them on what they have read. Rather, I use activities that allow them to draw on their reading to help them with other aspects of English, such as increasing their vocabulary knowledge or improving their oral fluency. The two activities that I describe in this article are designed to help students improve their writing and, at the same time, allow them to demonstrate their understanding of books they have read.

Timed repeated thinking and writing

Many teachers of English, in both second and foreign language contexts, are familiar with the activity called freewriting. In this activity, students are instructed to write about any topic without being concerned about grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. for a set period of time, say, five minutes. The purpose of freewriting is to help students get started, to generate ideas, often considered one of the most difficult steps in writing. Generally, the teacher does not correct or otherwise evaluate freewriting. Indeed, some believe that students' freewriting should be private—no one but the writer reads what has been written (Elbow and Belanoff 2000).

Timed Repeated Thinking and Writing (TRTW) builds on freewriting. This activity involves the students in writing without any concern about grammar, spelling, or punctuation. However, they are not free to write on any topic; they are instructed to write about a book they have read. Elbow and Belanoff (2000, 6–7) label this “focused freewriting.” The timed thinking feature allows the students a set period of time to think about their books before they begin to write.

Here are the instructions that I give to my students:

1. For one minute, think about a book that you have read.
2. Now write about the book for two minutes.
3. Stop. For two minutes, read what you wrote and think again about the story.
4. Now write again for two minutes. Start over from the beginning. (Do not continue from what you wrote in step 2.)
5. Repeat step 3.
6. Repeat step 4.

The students do not have their books in front of them for this activity; rather, they rely on their memories.

Not only does TRTW help students with one of the most important steps in writing—getting started—but the repeated feature also helps improve their writing fluency. And there is a third benefit: it allows me to gain insights into their reading. The activity helps me determine how well they have understood their books and what they have learned from their reading. Finally, TRTW enables me to monitor my students' reading. If they have not read a book, they will have little, if anything, to write about.

Timed repeated skimming and writing

Teachers of English might also be familiar with *timed repeated reading*, an activity that helps learners improve their reading fluency (Anderson 1993; Makaafi 2004). Students are instructed to read a text at a comfortable pace for overall understanding for a set period of time, often one or two minutes. At the end of the time, they stop, marking the last word they read. They go back to the beginning of the text, read again for the same period of time, stop, and mark the last word. The process is repeated a third time. Most often, learners read more the second and third times than they did the first time.

Timed Repeated Skimming and Writing (TRSW) combines timed repeated reading with timed repeated writing. Instead of reading at a comfortable pace for overall understanding, students skim their books. Then they write about their books for a given period of time. The goals are to improve the skill of skimming, to help students with getting started in the writing process, and to help students become more fluent writers.

Here are the instructions that I give to my students:

1. For one minute, skim a book that you have read.
2. Now write about the book for two minutes.
3. Stop. For one minute, read what you wrote.
4. Now skim the book again for one minute.
5. Now write again for two minutes. Start over from the beginning.
6. Repeat steps 3, 4, and 5 twice.

In Step 5, sometimes I instruct my students to continue writing, that is, to pick up their writing at the end of what they wrote during the previous timed period. Some students like this option because it allows them to write more about their books.

Like TRTW, this activity gives me insights into the reading that my students do. At the same time, TRSW allows them to gain proficiency in the important skill of skimming and helps them improve their writing fluency.

Discussion

The actual time that you give your students to do the two activities can easily be adjusted. For example, in the second activity, TRSW, you could give the students two minutes for skimming. While the time that students are allowed to complete the activities is not critical, it is necessary to do such activities regularly, over the semester or school year, in order for students to make gains in their written fluency.

Both activities can be used with high beginners to advanced students. The first time you use the activities, I suggest that you brainstorm with the class about what they might write. For example, you might want to begin by suggesting that your students engage in what Elbow and Belanoff (2000, 71) call “narrative thinking.” I tell my students to write down their thoughts about their books. You can get students started with prompts such as: “When I think about this book, the first thing that comes to mind is _____. Then I think about _____.”

When students repeat their writing, there are three options they can use. The first is to start again at the beginning and rewrite what they wrote the previous time. The second option is to continue writing from the end of the previous draft. In this case, have the students underline the last sentence of the previous draft and use that sentence as the first sentence for the next draft. The third option is to have students identify the most important idea they wrote in their first draft and then use that idea as a starting point for the second draft. This technique is then repeated for a third writing period.

I collect and read what my students write about their books. As I mentioned above, some believe that teachers should not read their students’ freewriting. This school of thought holds that the students are less free, are more restricted, in their writing when they know that their teacher will read what they

have written. However, my experiences with these two activities have not shown this. I tell the students that I will not evaluate or grade their writing, and I follow through on this. Students come to understand that the important thing is to write about their books.

I learn a great deal about my students’ reading and what they have understood. I frequently comment on content and very seldom on matters of usage. I provide feedback on grammar, spelling, and punctuation only when errors make it exceptionally hard or impossible for me to understand what students wrote. In discussing this infrequent and restricted feedback with my students, they tell me that they find it helpful. When I have asked my students specifically if the feedback restricts or inhibits their subsequent writing, the students have told me that it does not.

Finally, I like these two activities for another reason: they involve no teacher preparation time—a precious commodity. And the time I spend reading what my students have written is rewarding.

Conclusion

I am a strong supporter of extensive reading. Good things happen when EFL students read extensively. Studies show that they not only become fluent readers, but they also learn new words and expand their understanding of words they knew before. In addition, they write better, and their listening and speaking abilities improve. Extensive reading activities such as the two described in this article make student reading a resource for language practice in reading, vocabulary learning, listening, speaking, and writing.

References

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