



The Reading Matrix
Vol. 8, No. 1, April 2008

Connecting Reading and Writing in Second Language Writing Instruction by Alan Hirvela (2004)

The Michigan Series on Teaching Multilingual Writers

Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press
224 pp.

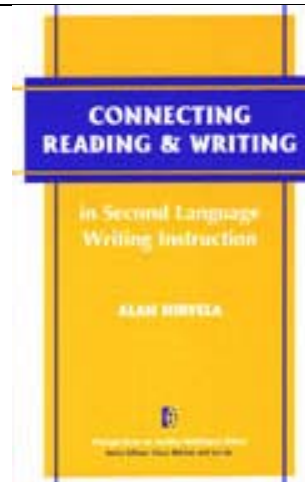
ISBN-10: 0472089188

ISBN-13: 978-0472089185

Cost: \$22.00

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Second language reading and writing have traditionally been conceptualized both in research and teaching as individual skills that could be analyzed into and taught as sets of independent sub-skills and strategies. Naturalistic studies of second language literacy acquisition and use, however, show that reading and writing cannot be separated from each other and from other activities in which they are situated (e.g., Belcher & Connor, 2001; Spack, 1997). They argue that for pedagogical approaches to be effective, the interconnected nature of these activities needs to be taken into account.

From this point of view, Alan Hirvela's (2004) book on reading-writing connections is a timely publication that embodies a major contribution to the field of second language literacy research and pedagogy. Aimed at teachers of second language writing, it argues for the focal space of reading in writing instruction by explaining how reading contributes to writing and vice versa. Situating the argument in theoretical discussions covering several disciplines, the book summarizes major pedagogical approaches to connecting reading and writing in literacy instruction and provides some very specific suggestions on how to implement this kind of pedagogy in the classroom.

The book contains five chapters. The first chapter presents an overview of the existing research on reading-writing connections. It starts with a quote from Tierney and Pearson (1983), which sets the theme for this chapter as well as for the rest of the book—that both reading and writing are in essence acts of composing. The author then reminisces about his teaching career and the changes in his conceptualization of reading and writing. His insightful stories are likely to appeal to the teachers reading the book, who may be sharing similar feelings and challenges in their professional lives. In simple terms, the chapter then summarizes major reviews of research on reading-writing connections both in L1 and L2 scholarship, starting with Stotsky (1983) and

culminating with Grabe (2001). In each review, he identifies themes of interest to the reviewers and traces them to theoretical assumptions about reading and writing and reading-writing connections. He additionally brings in literature on L1/L2 literacy transfer, L2 reading, contrastive rhetoric, plagiarism, and literacy demands in disciplines to show how the scholarship on reading-writing connections can benefit from other fields of scholarly study.

The second chapter attempts to link reading and writing through reader-response theory. In addition to summarizing the background and components of reader-response theory, it presents two scenarios which act as examples of how the theory could be used in practice. This is potentially the weakest chapter in the book for several reasons. The summary of the theory is rather sketchy and does not do enough justice to it, while the scenarios, though useful, resemble strategy-based instructional practices rather than those which would be rooted in reader response theory. Examples of real-life situations in which this theory was used effectively from a pedagogical standpoint would have been more useful in this chapter.

Chapters Three and Four deal with two sides of the same coin—contribution of writing to reading and contribution of reading to writing. After the review of literature on writing-to-read and writing-to-learn, in Chapter Three Hirvela discusses how writing could be used to enhance reading and learning in both L1 and L2 writing instruction. Activities teachers could use to help their students with reading and writing and identifying connections between them are presented and discussed in detail. Similar to the previous chapters, this chapter brings in the author's personal experiences. Hirvela briefly mentions how writing notes helped him to organize and understand his readings when he was writing this particular chapter, not only making reading the chapter entertaining but also helping the reader to visualize a concrete contribution of writing to reading and reading to writing. Chapter Four, focusing on reading-for-writing, is my personal favorite. Unlike the other chapters, it is more objective in that it acknowledges controversies and debates surrounding the implementation of reading-writing pedagogies in concrete socio-educational contexts.

Chapters Three and Four are possibly the most interesting chapters in the book and their contribution cannot be overemphasized. Teachers reading these chapters are likely to rethink their existing approaches to teaching writing and expand the repertoire of strategies to help students see and effectively utilize the connections between reading and writing.

Chapter Five presents models of reading-writing pedagogy. Starting with the general core principles that should guide such pedagogy, Hirvela then presents five models: computer-mediated, literature/response-based, collaborative, content-based, and sequential models. Discussion of each model is accompanied with suggestions on how to select texts and activities in each. As a way of summary, Hirvela then refocuses on what he calls "the major instructional modes" of response, writing-for-reading, and reading-for-writing and how these can be achieved in each pedagogical model. This is another well-written chapter full of pedagogical value. The major drawbacks of this chapter are, however, the somewhat unclear use of the terms 'model' and 'mode' and repetitiveness of the content.

Overall, this is a book that all teachers and researchers of writing and reading should read. Its numerous strengths include the author's ability to present relevant theories and research findings

in a comprehensive and comprehensible manner and his effort to incorporate concrete pedagogical suggestions on how to connect reading and writing in practice. The book is interspersed with useful and interesting quotes which make the reading even more enjoyable. The text is highly reader-friendly and considerate. Visually, the book is easy to navigate using lists, bullet points, tables, and other graphic organizers, though the author is not always consistent in using these. The main points are often summarized in visually separated lists and specific activities are suggested in visually isolated sections in some of the chapters. Each chapter is followed with questions for reflection and discussion, which themselves reflect a great deal of thinking and preparing on the part of the author.

There are a few weaknesses in this book as well. The most noticeable weakness, in addition to those mentioned above, is the author's avoidance of controversial issues. For instance, all the pedagogical approaches and strategies of connecting reading and writing are presented in a highly positive light, and disadvantages or weakness of implementing such pedagogies are mentioned only briefly, if at all, though they are often reflected in the questions at the end of the chapters. Discussing some of the difficulties in implementing reading-writing pedagogies would have been useful especially for those teachers who, though they may believe in the need to connect reading and writing, are faced with enormous situational challenges which prevent them from engaging the pedagogical models more effectively.

Notwithstanding the minor weaknesses, Alan Hirvela has to be congratulated for his immeasurable contribution to the discipline. Though the book is aimed at teachers of L2 writing, it can definitely be used in research as well as teacher education as the primary text in both undergraduate and graduate courses on literacy development. The persuasive power of the book is such that I personally felt the urge to culminate my reading of the book by writing something about it, and this review seemed to be a natural option. As a researcher and a teacher helping postgraduate students to improve their reading, I have always felt that reading at this level cannot be taught without mentioning writing. This book has equipped me with more teaching strategies but also with a conviction that I was right and that reading should be taught together and not separately from writing at least at this stage of academic development.

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