LESSON PLAN PROPOSAL: USING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND PREVIOUS STRUCTURE KNOWLEDGE FOR A TIMED-WRITING ACTIVITY AS A RESULT OF READING AND PRE-READING SEQUENCES

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Abstract
Second year students at the English teaching training school in Villa del Totoral have to comply with *Discursive Practices II* as one of the mandatory subjects in the curriculum. When it comes to teaching/learning and learning/acquiring a second language, EFL has been mainstreamed into a balance of the skills and subsidiary linguistic skills namely reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and pronunciation. The focus of this proposal is to shed light on the importance of the reading/writing connections in a task-based EFL class. In these lessons, students have to engage in the continuous interplay in which those skills are intrinsically related. The abundant literature underpinning the expected benefits of leading integrating actions for students’ production involves interactive models, discourse and cognitive perspectives, and top-down and bottom-up approaches to reading.

Keywords: Approaches for reading and writing — EFL in Tertiary education - Reading & writing connections

PROPUESTA DE PLAN DE CLASE: EL USO DEL CONOCIMIENTO DEL MUNDO Y CONOCIMIENTO PREVIO DE ESTRUCTURAS PARA UNA ACTIVIDAD DE TIEMPO MEDIDO COMO RESULTADO DE SECUENCIAS DE LECTURA Y PRE-LECTURA

Resumen

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Los estudiantes de segundo año del profesorado de Inglés de Villa del Totoral deben cumplir con el espacio curricular Prácticas Discursivas del Inglés II como parte obligatoria del plan de estudios. En lo que respecta a la enseñanza/aprendizaje y aprendizaje/adquisición de una lengua extranjera, la didáctica ha incorporado el balance entre las habilidades y sub habilidades lingüísticas como lectura, escritura, habla, escucha, vocabulario, gramática, puntuación y pronunciación. El foco de esta propuesta es el de describir la importancia de las relaciones de lectura y escritura en una actividad de dicha asignatura. Los estudiantes deben trabajar con las interrelaciones que estas habilidades conllevan. La abundante literatura en la que se basan las expectativas positivas al llevar a cabo acciones en la que la producción de los alumnos involucra modelos interactivos, perspectivas discursivas y cognitivas y los enfoques top-down y bottom-up.

**Palabras clave:** Conexiones entre lectura y escritura - Enfoques en lectura y escritura – Inglés como lengua extranjera en el nivel superior

**Introduction**

This pedagogical proposal aims at describing aspects of the theoretical background that underlines a foreign language class. The above described and presented lesson plan is to be included in Discursive Practices II chair–a second year subject at the English teacher training programme in Villa del Totoral. In this course, learners study English language at a pre-intermediate level together with the four macro skills–listening, speaking, reading, and writing- and elements of the language such as pronunciation, accentuation, vocabulary, and grammar. According to the Ministry guidelines, students have seven 40-minute-classes a week on Thursdays and Fridays. The latter will be the eligible day for the implementation of this proposal: There are four 40-minute classes administered from 5 to 8 pm, which would give enough time for the discussion of the reading activities, checking on pre-writing, and then time for the main writing activity. According to the course syllabus, the role of the learners is active and as such, each one has to do some tasks in order to complete one unit every fourteen
days, which is part of extra-class duties. There is some pre-reading to carry out before the class in order to pursue the completion of the unit in the estimated amount of time.

Johns (1997) describes literacy as a term which encompasses reading and writing and goes beyond them as it requires the interpretation of the fact that reading and writing skills are influenced by listening and speaking as well. Thus, this broad term includes “learning processes as well as products, form as well as content, readers’ as well as writers’ roles and purposes” (Johns, 1997, p. 2). Also, Johns (1997, p. 4) highlights the importance of reading-writing as key elements in the acquisition process and, as it is learners, in turn, who are responsible for making meaning out of texts, as active participants in the acquisition of the foreign language.

Another concept that will help describe the nature of the implementation of this class has to do with traditional and recent views of reading-writing tasks. Johns (1997, p. 6-7) describes a traditional, positivistic view, based on facts and grammar, and form-focused compositions. Conversely, the approaches to the teaching of English that Prácticas Discursivas II course fosters are more connected to Whole Language Teaching, the Communicative Approaches (Richards and Rodgers, 2001) and the Lexical Approach (Brown, 2007). On par with the underpinning theory of the subject, Johns (1997, p. 10) describes Whole Language reading and other approaches that draw from Expressivism, which states that learners can be liberated from “outside constrains so that they can write and read freely and creatively” (Johns, 1997, p. 10).

Whether the learner approaches a reading-writing activity in a traditional or way or not, there is a key item which must be taken into account: The previous knowledge of the world that learners bring to the text. This is depicted by schema theory (Johns, 1997: 11) and will play a key role in the implementation of the lesson plan below. Learners are expected to rely on their past experiences and knowledge of the world to make sense of the reading excerpts and, in turn, to deal with a follow-up writing assignment; likewise, by dealing with past conceptualizations. As Kant (1781 as cited in Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983, p. 73) stated “new information, new concepts, new ideas can have meaning only when they can be related to something the individual already knows” which is linked to the key notions of schema theory. It is vital to acknowledge the importance of background knowledge within a model of reading. This may also “compensate for certain syntactic deficiencies” (Coady, 1979 as cited in Carrell &
Eisterhold, 1983). As the learner may find the reading piece interesting, that can compensate for a lack of syntactic or semantic knowledge in turn.

For Carrell & Eisterhold (1983, p. 76) understanding a text is the outcome of the interplay between the “reader’s background knowledge and the text”. Succinctly speaking, this is what schema theory entails. Regarding the interpretation of a written text, two modes of information processing come into play: bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down-processing (conceptually-driven). There is a hierarchy that impacts on both models: Top-down involves “general predictions based on a higher level” Carrell & Eisterhold (1983: 77), whereas bottom-up is related to incoming data. Rumelhart (1980, as cited in Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) highlights the importance of the simultaneous occurrence of both types of processing; Bottom-up processes makes schemata be available and top-down “facilitates their assimilation if they are anticipated by or consistent with the reader’s conceptual expectations”.

Esker and Grabe (1988, p. 223) describe the terms “top” and “down” as “metaphors”, being the first one related to an abstract concept of “higher order” and the second one as more concrete, related to the “physical” text. Esker and Grabe (1988, p. 223) note that, according to different scholars, either interactive reading model can be taken as a starting point to approach a reading text.

For the purposes of this proposal, the interpretation of sample paragraphs will be key for the successful completion of the writing task. Likewise, the background knowledge, together with the knowledge of structures (schemata) will play a vital role in the completion of the task.

Another author who poses a basic description of the importance of reading passages and pre-writing activities for the successful completion of written tasks is Hyland (2003), who describes the importance of:

- **Language scaffolding**: The unit from which students have to give the first steps before embarking upon the class timed-writing activity is scaffolded as it offers a gradual increase in the level of completion and difficulty.
- **Models**: Unit 10 also offers a vast amount of input which works as models for future writing activities and to raise awareness on specific features of the samples.
Stimulus materials: They “are also commonly employed to initiate pre-writing and post-writing reflexions and tasks.” (Hyland, 2003).

Thus, the reading-writing connection intends to be seen in the final production of the series of tasks suggested by the coursebook unit.

Parodi (2007, p. 957) intends to shed light on the reading-writing connections from a discourse and cognitive perspectives fostering a naturalistic approach. Parodi (2007, p. 958) states that a number of similarities between reading and writing is given and, by analysing them analytically and systematically, two outcomes appear in terms of “significant correlations between reading and writing” as well as “the strongest links are detected at the level of local cohesion and the microstructural level”. Another noticeable feature of the relationship between reading and writing is described by Spivey (1990 as cited in Parodi, 2007, p. 959) who states that “if a written text is produced from particular sources, then the reader becomes the writer because the source text is transformed into a new text”. This entails that the writer organises, selects and makes connections in order to “elaborate meaning” (Parodi, 2007, p. 959). Hirvela (2004, p. 30) describes a historical development of the writing and reading skills: Until the 1990s, they were taught separately, they were mutually excluded from each other, and single texts were used to read or write instead of using a variety of them. Besides, reading was considered to be a passive skill that would involve decoding meaning. Conversely, writing was considered “an active skill” (Hirvela (2004, p. 9) on part of the student. For the purpose of this pedagogical proposal, the focus on the necessary relationship between reading and writing skills will be taken as vital. Furthermore, as it has been stated in the course syllabus, an active role of the learner both in reading, writing, and reading-writing activities will be key for this compulsory task completion.

Our lesson

By the end of the lesson/unit, the learner is expected to develop a narrative paragraph according to the reading models presented; use reading as input for the written production; tell a personal story by setting his/her creativity free; and, make meaning out of personal conceptualizations.

As it was noted in the introduction, an array of reading and pre-writing activities is usually assigned every two weeks. For this unit (10) the topic is Narrative
Paragraphs. First, some theory on the topic is displayed. Then, examples are posed. The following pages disclose examples, analyses of those examples, and short questionnaires. Then paragraph sequencing and analysis of vocabulary are given. Finally, ideas for writing are displayed. Students have the chance to write the paragraphs following those ideas and email their tutor for correction. The instructions for the central activity are:

Choose a specific event from your childhood that you consider special or significant. Why do you still remember this event? You might decide to write about your first day of school, a particularly difficult class or exam, a time when you were called to the principal’s office for something you had done, or one of your early birthday parties. Describe the people and places that are related to the event. Use vivid language to help your readers imagine that they were actually there with you at the event. Your goal is to make your readers clearly understand why this event is so special or significant to you (Folse et al, 2010, p. 197).

This is rubric for timed-writing is meant to be performed in 25 minutes—five minutes for brainstorming and 20 for drafting, editing, and writing.

In relation to the materials, we use five graded novels for the pre-intermediate level which are mainly used for speaking, reading, and writing sections. Also, the central coursebook is English File Pre Intermediate 3rd edition and its workbook for further practice. As the foci of those materials is not specific for writing skills, the book From great paragraphs to great essays is used from March to September for writing in the first place and for reading and vocabulary building.

One expected outcome is that learners can make meaning out of the reading passages by surpassing the linguistic boundaries (knowledge of grammar rules, punctuation, vocabulary, format, etc.) and relying on their background knowledge in the production stage (part three—timed writing). Another expected result is that novel writers can develop basic competences to become competent academic writers as ESL/EFL teachers in service in the long run. Finally, novel writers with low command of the target language usually think there is nothing that they can do with the language. By raising awareness on the linguistic baggage they bring to the class, a positive attitude may come up.
Concluding remarks

When it comes to writing activities, it is vital not to neglect the reading-writing relationship. Reading is input and, consequently, it will provide models for the target language in general and second language writing in particular. In the final-and central-task, features of positivistic views on writing tasks were observed (involving linguistic competence), but also, features of communicative competence were displayed as well. Also, aspects of Expressivism were given: Yet guided, learners were free to choose from all their anecdotes and experiences and their creativity was favoured rather than restricted. The interplay between what the individual already knew and what he/she was expected to do was key in the completion of the task as learners had to draw knowledge from their schemata. Top-down and bottom-up processing were put into practice simultaneously.

References


