

A Report on the RELC Regional Seminar in "Reading and Writing Research : Implications for Language Education"



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Each year, around April, the SEAMEO Regional English Language Centre in Singapore organizes an annual seminar with the themes changing annually. Participants number around 600 each year and come from all parts of the world i.e. the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the ASEAN member countries, namely, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. With its widening appeal, participants in recent years have also come from other areas such as Israel, Germany, Hong Kong, etc. (For the background and programs of RELC-SEAMEO, Singapore, refer to Appendix A of this paper.)

Papers presented, therefore, cover research conducted in these countries, mainly on the English language, but also on other languages such as Mandarin, French, German, Dutch, and Bahasa Indonesia.

As mentioned earlier, the annual "theme" of the conference changes annually. For instance, in the previous year (1993) the Annual Regional Seminar at RELC dealt with the theme of "English for Specific Purposes or ESP".

For the 1994 Seminar, the theme was *Reading and Writing Research: Implications for Language Education*, a rather broad coverage which included, in fact, two themes, reading and writing. Most papers presented, however, were on writing.

The general format of this Regional Language Seminar follows the usual seminar/conference style, with papers organized into three types, namely: keynote addresses (or plenary sessions) (12 papers); parallel sessions (109 papers); and workshops (20 papers).

This paper is a development of a lecture which I presented at Dhurakijpundit University in May 1994 on the RELC Seminar on "Reading and Writing Research: Implications for Language Education" which the writer attended in Singapore.

I have chosen five papers and one workshop presented at RELC which I hope will be of interest to academics and interested readers alike. (For further background details on each of the papers/workshop reported in this paper, refer to Appendix B of this paper.)

ESL WRITING ASSESSMENT TASKS: GIVING STUDENTS A CHOICE

It is commonly agreed that, by giving students more than one topic to choose from, on a writing test, the reliability of the test itself could be impaired. Yet, it is common practice to offer students a choice of topics. This particular study examined how students choose topics in an assessment situation. It also examined the possible effects such choices may have on the resulting essay.

In the study, 40 university ESL students (20 *unskilled* and 20 *skilled writers*) were observed in a simulated assessment situation (*writing test*) in which the students were given a choice of 3 topics. After writing the essay, the students were interviewed as to "how" and "why" they chose a particular topic. Preliminary results showed what students believed to be good test-taking strategies (*such as choosing a topic they believed did not require any planning*) actually conflicted with strategies that are claimed to be important in the writing process (*such as the need to plan ahead prior to writing*.)

In the 30 minutes allowed, students were asked to choose from 3 given prompts such as the following:

Prompt 1: *"Describe the best or worst experience you have had in the past year."* (chosen by 9 students)

Prompt 2: *"Compare and contrast some aspects of life in your country with some aspects of life in America."* (chosen by 12 students)

Prompt 3: *"Should smoking in public places be against the law? Why or why not?"* (chosen by 5 students)

The students were then interviewed along the following lines:

- *why did you choose the topic?*
- *which was the easiest/hardest topic? Why?*
- *when you were writing, were you happy you had chosen the topic?*
- *how do you usually decide on a topic during a test situation?*
- *do you like having a choice during a test?*
- *how many is a good number of choices: 1, 2, 3, 4, etc?*

During the actual test, students were found to "wander" backwards and forwards prior to making a decision in choosing a particular prompt to write on.

It was discovered that students chose a specific topic (or prompt) for the following reasons:

- *perceived familiarity or background knowledge* (22 students)
- *generality or specificity of a prompt* (12 students)
- *perceived rhetorical structure elicited by a prompt* (7 students)
- *interest level of the topic* (2 students)
- *knowledge of appropriate English vocabulary* (2 students)

Also, it was found that students did not have an idea what to write prior to making a choice; students did not have time to read what they wrote; some students did not choose a topic because it was too broad.

Keynote Address No 4

TEN STEPS TO PLANNING A WRITING COURSE AND TRAINING TEACHERS OF WRITING

This paper demonstrated 10 steps recommended for planning a writing course. Essentially, these steps should involve the following.

- Ascertaining goals and institutional constraints

Goals of teachers and students and goals established by institutions, exams, curricula, mandated textbooks: how can we reconcile them?

- Deciding on theoretical principles

What is relevant here is the ideology of teaching and the theoretical commitments made by adopting an approach, for example, using text models or focusing on content or form.

- Planning content

Here, the teacher has to ask, "*What do we want students to write?*" The actual writing might involve "*personal issues, cultural issues, literature, etc.*" However, writing should be a tool for language learning.

- Weighting the elements

Here, we have to ask ourselves, "*What are we going to focus on in the writing course?*" Obviously, there's a need to establish priorities. What will be most important. Are we looking for originality, style, or accuracy?

- Drawing up a syllabus

There is the need to decide on the type of syllabus organization. "*What do we get the students to do? And, in what order?*" In ESL writing, the writing course can be organized around the following: various points of structure (*grammar*); function (*writing to persuade, or, writing to classify*); topic (*various topics of issues*); situation (*such as applying for a job*); skills and processes (*generation of ideas; revising; writing effective conclusions*); tasks (*writing could be a problem solving activity such as writing for a class magazine.*)

- Selecting materials

What books or other materials should the teacher use? (*videos, software*) Is the text culturally suitable? Here, the situation is not clear-cut. "Is culture necessary in learning ESL? Can we separate language from culture? Also, does the text help students to generate ideas? "

- Preparing activities and roles

The teacher has to analyze what the students will be doing, and why. There is also the need to establish the teacher's role in the writing process and the writing classroom.

- Choosing types and methods of feedback

Here, the following questions have to be asked: "*What does the teacher have time for?*" In large classes, not every paper has to be seen. Students should know what is required of them.

- Evaluating the course

Teachers have to evaluate the students', progress and determine the success of the course by using "*portfolios*", whereby, students use multiple drafts commented on by teachers but which are not graded. A second teacher grades the "*portfolios*".

- Reflecting the teacher's experience

Here, teachers should take into account the wisdom of what has "*worked before*", and "*why*"? The question to answer here is, "*How can a writing course include the benefits of what we have done in the past?*"

The next paper attempts to handle the difficulties encountered by ESL students reading English texts because of cultural conflicts implicit in L1 (*his own native language*) and L2 (*the target language, English, in this case*).

INTERTEXTUALITY AND READING FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

ESL teachers often teach reading skills concentrating on what can be called the *"mechanics: the grammar, the punctuation, the format, the vocabulary, the use of discourse markers and other cohesive devices."* Again, many ESL teachers concentrate on *"understanding the message."* The ways in which we determine whether our students have understood the message appropriately are often open to question.

In this paper, the speaker argued that although much valuable research has been done on the techniques of the reading process, there has been little investigation into the *"problems that the students have in interacting critically with the text."* It is clear that students approach the text from their own *"context of culture"* and *"context of situation"*.

Moreover, ESL students do not have the appropriate *"intertextual - interactional skills"* which exist in *"intertextuality"*. In the words of the speaker, *"they have little awareness of how to interact with the text to grasp its deeper, contextual and cultural meanings."* ESL students have a tendency to accept the text *"as is"* rather than questioning why it is like that.

Consequently, assigning ESL students to read L1 texts will mean that the students do not properly grasp the *"deeper"* or *"cultural meaning"* and therefore, students only give the text a superficial consideration. Such *"superficial reading"*, according to the speaker, is not enough.

How then should the teacher deal with such cultural mis-matches? How should the teacher deal with any cultural clashes which might occur? To prepare the students, they should be *"sensitized"* to different types of *"readings"*. Here then, the *"purpose"*

prepared culturally, they will be able to cope with and better understand such readings better. An open-minded approach by the students themselves is also necessary.

Essentially, the above comments pertain to readings in the humanities area. For scientific and technological readings, the texts are obviously more neutral and are not necessarily culturally *"biased"* one way or the other as in the case of humanities.

The next paper centers on the written language as used in the workplace. Accordingly, the paper is entitled:

Parallel Session No 3

WRITTEN LANGUAGE IN THE WORKPLACE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING

As the workplace and the work itself both undergo structural changes, ideas regarding *"on the job training"* and *"education"* are being redefined. The speaker used the Australian working environment for her study.

Australia is, as are many other countries, going through a period of extensive industrial change. Organizations are being restructured, jobs are being redesigned, new technologies are being introduced along with changes in industrial relations practices.

Central to this industrial change is understanding the role of spoken and written language in training. Essential to the success of both on and off-site training is the effective integration of issues of language and culture into such training. In addition, spoken and written language are fundamental to the description of competencies in any area. It is no longer sufficient to see literacy and language training as something that can be tagged on at the end or as a bottom end component of any kind of education and training.

Consequently, there is a need to understand what literacy is and to recognize the written language demands of workplace tasks, and to be able to present spoken and written language in a way which will be "acceptable" to trainees.

Moreover, many of the so-called "trainers" are not necessarily "trained teachers". The ability to perform is one thing. The ability to teach is quite another. Often, the "trainers" themselves disagree on the meaning of the very same "text" (*training manual*, etc). Consequently, training materials need to be presented in a form suited to the learning situation. The text should follow through step by step in a natural progression.

The next paper was given in the form of a workshop and combined with discussion and hands-on experience.

Workshop Session B

EFFECTIVE ENGLISH: PRACTICAL PROCESS FOR BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY

This workshop considered issues of writing within a business rather than an academic setting and the transferability of teaching methods developed in academic settings to the "real world". Participants were shown how it was possible to help learners to experience writing as a process and how to improve the efficiency of their writing by intervening in this process. The workshop also suggested strategies to sensitize learners to aspects of "audience awareness" including "intercultural awareness."

A useful technique demonstrated in the workshop involved the so-called "double-overlay" technique. This involved the preparation of texts on overhead transparencies. This was then copied onto paper by students. Students worked on their copies. These were then overlaid onto the original. However,

this technique would seem to be suitable for small to medium sized groups only.

The speaker also talked about "planning for success". According to the workshop presenter, planning for success involved taking five steps: decide why you are writing (*write the topic sentence*); prepare the main points; prepare the links; write the conclusion; and lastly, write the introduction.

The final paper I will report on concerns reading .

Parallel Session No 26

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SHORT ENJOYABLE SESSIONS IN THE TEACHING OF READING .

This paper looked at the effectiveness of short, intensive and enjoyable sessions in the teaching of reading comprehension and study skills including speed reading. The data for this study were taken from a random sampling of 200 students enrolled in special summer reading classes in the Philippines.

Students were given a pre-test and post-test. Results from the tests showed a substantial increase in reading speed, accuracy, and vocabulary/comprehension levels. Of the students undertaking the courses, 98% increased their reading levels by at least one grade higher (*those who normally received C's would get B's*). Moreover, 25% of students increased their reading speed, accuracy, and vocabulary/comprehension levels by at least two grade levels. According to the speaker, such improvements "may be" due to greater intellectual stimulation provided by the techniques and materials used in the teaching of reading.

The main reading technique used focused on "love for reading" and on "learning is fun". Varied learning activities were provided and each session involved active student involvement.

In addition to the keynote addresses, parallel sessions, and workshops presented, the Regional Seminar also acted as the venue for book exhibitions and sale by established publishers such as Oxford University Press, Macmillan Publishers, Prentice-Hall Regents, and Longman. The Regional English Language Centre itself, also provided its own display and sale of its various RELC publications (see Appendix A).

Conclusion

Accordingly, all of the 600 or so participants benefitted from this SEAMEO/RELC Regional Seminar in Singapore and it can be said in all truthfulness that the 1994 RELC Regional Seminar on *"Reading and Writing Research: Implications for Language Education"* achieved its aim: to acquaint language educators in the region with current reading and writing research findings and their implications for language education in Southeast Asia; to discuss the developments, issues and directions in reading and writing instruction in the first/second/foreign language situation in the region; to provide an opportunity for language educators and reading and writing educators to constitute themselves into a network of interested professionals to do collaborative research projects and/or regularly exchange research findings; to increase instructional effectiveness in reading and writing classrooms.

APPENDIX A

The activities and responsibilities of RELC can be categorized into 3 areas: teaching programs; library and information centre; and, RELC publications:

RELC Teaching Programs

- RELC or Regional English Language Centre, located in Singapore, is an educational project of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO). The general objective of RELC is to assist

member countries (*the ASEAN countries*) in improving the teaching of languages and, to that end : to conduct advanced training courses, including courses leading to higher degrees ; to undertake research and publications and other activities related to the needs and problems of the region.

- In 1977, the RELC Language Teaching Institute (LTI) was established to function as the direct teaching unit of the Centre in response to the language learning needs of Singapore and elsewhere in Asia.

- RELC offers two main types of training courses in various areas of practice -oriented language teacher education. The MA course is 15 months; the Diploma course is 6 months; and, the Certificate courses are 4 months each.

RELC Library and Information Centre

- The RELC Library and Information Centre is an important source of information on language education and research. The library acts as a source centre of linguistic information for the ASEAN region and holds a very extensive collection of publications and research material.

RELC Publications

- RELC publishes the *"RELC Journal"* and the *"Guidelines"*. Both are produced twice a year for researchers, academics, and language practitioners. RELC also publishes *"Anthologies"* and *"Occasional Papers"* covering a wide range of topics.

APPENDIX B

The 5 papers and 1 workshop reported in this paper were the following:

Parallel Session No. 29 "ESL Writing Assessment Tasks: Giving Students a Choice", Ms Charlene Polio and Ms Margo Glew, Michigan State

University, English Language Center, East Lansing, Michigan, USA.

Keynote Address No. 4 "*Ten Steps to Planning a Writing Course and Training Teachers of Writing*", Dr. Ann Raimes, Hunter College, The City University, of New York, Department of English, New York, NY, USA.

Parallel Session No.78 "*Intertextuality and Reading for Specific Purposes*", Dr. Adrian E Hare, English Language Department, Jalan University, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, MALAYSIA.

Parallel Session No. 3 "*Written Language in the Workplace: Implications for Training*", Ms Diana

Slade and Ms Hermine Scheeres, The Department of Language & Literacy, Faculty of Education, University of Technology, Sydney, AUSTRALIA.

Workshop B "*Effective English: Practical Process Writing for Business and Technology*", Mr Simon Rea, Johannes Kepler University, Linz, AUSTRIA.

Parallel Session No. 26 "*A Study of the Effectiveness of Short Enjoyable Sessions in the Teaching of Reading*", Mrs Doris R; Arrevillaga, Philippine Science College, Quezon City, PHILIPPINES. □□