# READING AND WRITING CONNECTIONS:
# A WAY TO MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO READ

*Elizabeth Barragán Hernández - Sandra Torres Weissleder*
*Universidad Distrital de Colombia*

## Abstract

" Reading has much to do with what the reading brings to the text and how the reader interacts with the text as with the text itself"(Vivian Zamel, 1994).

Throughout our teaching experience we have seen that in general, students are not motivated when reading is part of the tasks to develop in specialized subjects in the tertiary level. This is the case of students of VI semester at the Distrital University in Semantics and Pragmatics Analysis in which they are required to read about topics that deal with the subject mentioned above. The possible reasons why students did not want to read might be the lack of purpose to do it. Therefore, we decided to find a solution to this situation. After doing some literature review we agreed on implementing some of Vivian Zamel and Haines' ideas to overcome the problem. According to Zamel, one of the ways to establish a purpose when reading, is to connect writing in the process of reading and to develop an information and research project in which students develop reading comprehension and writing skills. This paper is intended to help other teachers motivate their students to read with a defined purpose.

Considering that most of tertiary level students do not find a real purpose in doing academic reading for some of the subjects that require full commitment on the part of the students, we decided to do some research to create the need, the habit of reading and to motivate them for this purpose. We realized that students were not motivated enough to read in English. We are teaching courses that require a lot of teaching such as Semantic – Pragmatic Analysis, Phonology and Phonetics, Syntax, and Morphology. As it can be inferred, these courses require deep reading, analysis and discussion to be fully understood by the students. These activities cannot really be done if students do not read. We assume that they do not read because they feel they are not proficient enough in the target language (English is a foreign language in this context), or because they do not feel it is important or interesting. Therefore, it can be seen as an imposed activity, something they have to do, not something they like.

## Solving the problem

After having analyzed the problematic situation, we decided to implement some theories to develop the reading skill by connecting it with writing by means of a project work.

## Theoretical framework

According to Strang (1953), bringing meaning to the printed page indicates more accurately the reciprocal process between the printed symbols and the mind of the reader. Some mental processes like problem – solving and reasoning involve analyzing, discriminating, judging, evaluating and synthesizing. All these mental processes are based on past experience, so that reading a text must be scrutinized in the light of the reader's

own experience. Considering that reading involves a specific mental process it is our objective in this paper to present a way to make learners aware of certain factors of the reading process, so they will be more successful at reading and understanding by themselves. These factors are: expectation, interest, and comprehension.

Expectation: if there is a reason to read, the reader has some expectation as to what he will find, and this expectation will control the amount of interest he will have.

Interest: a reader´s general interest is determined by his own life experience. So students must be asked to find their own points of personal interest and formulate questions and hypotheses around these points when reading.

Comprehension: the reader can adopt some strategies to understand the text, such as drawing on his knowledge of the world, asking questions, and making hypotheses, using knowledge and testing his hypotheses, as he proceeds. Hudson (1982), Nuttal (1982) and Daneman (1988) point out that a text becomes easier if it corresponds to students' prior knowledge of language, rhetorical conventions, and the world.

One form to increase these factors (expectation, interest and comprehension) is, according to Zamel (1994), to connect reading and writing, writing in fact contributes to the development of reading since it becomes an opportunity to generate and explore meaning. Learners can benefit from creating their own texts,

these written pieces provide means through which they record their own experiences and consider their own realities. The process of writing shares much in common with the process of learning, it gives rise to the generation and reconceptualization of ideas that may not have been possible otherwise.

Moreover, one cannot write without reading for as we write the words flow or dribble onto the page. One can read without writing, but understanding is much deeper if the response to that reading is done in writing. Unfortunately, reading continues to be viewed as necessarily preceding writing, to offer a paradigm to internalize, to act as a stimulant for writing, or to provide subject matter to write about.

Having this in mind, we decided to make some changes in this common process mentioned above due to the fact that writing makes it possible for us to read rather than the other way around.

These changes involve a project work in which the learners must decide what they will do and how they will do it, and this includes not only the content of the project but also the language requirements (Fried – Booth, 1986). Some of the characteristics of project work are: (i) authentic language use, (ii) authentic tasks, and (iii) learner centerlines (Robinson, 1991).

In the project developed by the students, they worked together to achieve a common purpose, a concrete outcome (a written report and an oral presentation of the topic they selected). Students carried

out types of projects (Haines, 1989), information and research projects. What these different types of projects have in common is their emphasis on student involvement, collaboration and responsibility. They require the students to work together over several weeks, both inside and outside the classroom.

According to Fried – Booth (1986), the best way to develop projects in the classroom varies, but the eight fundamental steps that are based in collaborative tasks are the following: 1. Define the theme. 2. Determine the final outcome (purpose). 3. Structure the project (determine procedures). 4. Identify language skills and strategies (linguistic competence). 5. Gather information (data collection). 6. Compile and analyze information (compare findings with partners in the group). 7. Present a final project (written report and presentation). 8. Evaluate the project (reflection on the steps taken to accomplish their objectives and the language, communicative skills they have acquired in the process. Students can identify aspects of the project which could be improved or enhanced in future attempts at project work).

**Procedure**

The following is a description of the procedure carried out in order to solve the afore mentioned problem.

The subjects of this study were eighteen students aged from 19 to 22 from the VI semester of the Modern Languages Program at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. This project

was undertaken in the form of action research in Semantic and Pragmatic analysis, in which the teacher was the researcher and the guide. Students had four hours a week of instruction. Thirty minutes of each session were dedicated to the theoretical guidance and the remaining time to the practice and development of the project.

In each session students developed graded and sequenced tasks. It means that the first task was the basis for the next one, and the final product (research paper) was the result of the process followed during the semester.

Since students were apathetic to read, the research project was proposed to motivate them and to find a real purpose to do it. At the beginning some of them did not want to carry the project on, because they thought it was going to be harder and more time – consuming. But others considered it was a great opportunity to reach their goals and to make the best of the course, due to the fact that this project would contribute to their professional training, would focus on their own interests and would lead them to read with a purpose. There was an argument, and finally they all decided that it was a good way to study the main topics of the course.

The following is a brief description of what students did throughout the development of the research project.

1. Students decided the topic they wanted to work on. The topic had to be related to the main contents of the subject. The topics they selected

were: non – verbal signs, language variation, and discourse analysis.

2. The class was divided into six groups. Each group was conformed by three students. After selecting the topic, the teacher guided them to narrow it down according to the main goals they wanted to achieve. These main goals were:

- Analysis of non – verbal signals used in a film. They wanted to know the importance of non - verbal signals in the communicative process.

- Differences in responses and interpretations students of the 9th grade made towards a film. This was to see the language variation and factors that might affect it, such as social, cultural, sexual, psychological and the context.

- Analysis in the discourse of a song to find denotative and connotative meanings and the relationship between male and female implicit in the song.

- Finding the responses towards a song and identifying the aspects that influence those responses.

- Identifying how close the relationships between people are according to their own body language in different daily situations.

- Identifying and recognizing the principal non – verbal signs used by students of first semester in the English Communication class and

stating if they help in the oral communication so that it is possible to establish the relationship there is between oral communication and non – verbal signs.

3. Students oganized an outline according to the explanations given by the teacher referring to the steps of the research guidelines.

4. Students wrote their first drafts and revised them with their teacher and their peers. These drafts contained the title, topic, research questions, objectives and rationale. These drafts were checked following the guidelines of other research projects that served as models. After the revision was done, students rewrote this part again.

5. The title selected, guided the students toward the theoretical framework. So they organized an outline to develop it. Then, the students started to look for suitable information to read about the topic selected, the teacher handed out additional readings so that students could use them to complete their theoretical framework. While students were reading and writing, they asked the teacher for some individual conferences to clarify specific doubts about the contents of the readings as well as the academic writing, since they knew how important it was to support and give quality to their final products (written report and the presentations of their projects).

6. After having this theoretical framework refined, students received

some information on the data collection procedures, so they followed up their research.

7. Students designed the instruments for collecting and organizing the data and discussed them with their peers and teacher. Some of the instruments were observation schemes, surveys and questionnaires.

8. Students started to analyze the data taking into account common points and differences to state conclusions with evidence from the data. These conclusions were done according to research questions and objectives of their projects.

9. These project papers were revised and rewritten as many times as necessary until they were considered satisfactory by both the teacher and the students.

10. Finally, students defended their papers.

## Conclusions

- Creating a need for reading motivates students to read with a real purpose and to achieve specific goals.

- Having learners as researchers in EFL classrooms enables them to gain access to the information needed to be acquired in the course they were taking.

- Connecting reading and writing gives studens the opportunity to become actively involved in their own learning process.

- Making students aware of their reading process allows them not just to learn something from a text but to learn how one learns as well as to develop learning skills.

- Having a real purpose when reading, students are more likely to work harder than those who fail to see the benefits.

- Being involved in the writing process helps students to generate and explore meaning.

- Working collaboratively with peers and the teacher gives students the opportunity to interact and to work as a team for solving problems together.

## Bibliography

- DANEMAN, M. (1988) Word Knowledge and Reading Skill. In Reading Research: Advances in Theory and Practice. California: Academic Press, Inc.

- FRIED – BOOTH, D.L. (1986) Project Work with Advanced Classes. ELT Journal.

- HAINES, S. (1989) Pojects for the EFL Classroom. Resource Materials for Teachers. Walton – on – Thames Surrey, UK Nelson.

- HUDSON, T. (1982) The effects of Induced Schemata on the "Short Circuit" in L2 Reading. Language Learning.

- NUTTAL, C. (1982) Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

- ROBINSON, P. (1991) ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide. New York: Prentice Hall.

- STRANG, R. (1953) What is Communicated? In Reading and Process. The Open University Press.

- ZAMEL, V. (1994) Writing One's Way into Reading. ELT Journal.