



## The Organic Integration of Reading & Writing through Thematic Journeys

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### Abstract

*English language learners enrolled in American universities face the tremendous challenge of competing with native speakers of English in courses across the academic disciplines, which often demand strong skills in both reading and writing. Second language writing has mostly been taught as an independent entity as if it were somehow divorced from reading. However, over the last few years, many university systems in the U.S. have considered a departure from the traditional method of teaching reading and writing skills in isolation, and have moved toward a more integrated approach. Building on Community College Research Center's (CCRC) groundbreaking research findings on methods of integrating reading and writing instruction, this article reinforces the idea that the task of skill integration is not simply a process of throwing together traditional reading and writing curricula, but rather celebrating the reciprocal response relationship of reading and writing. It is our contention that such an approach will make a more lasting impact on second language learners' writing proficiency.*

*Clearly, reading is the food for writing, and writing is enriched by exposure to vast amounts of reading. An integrated approach ensures that students are given the opportunity to follow the organic path from reading and reflecting on what they have read, to exploring their thoughts in writing. In addition, integration does not stop after students write their first draft. In fact, integration is further extended as students think about what they have written, revise their preliminary draft and read more for reference and cite other works.*

*In teaching L2 writing, we propose an integrated model that focuses on a series of thematic units revolving around popular academic disciplines, (e.g., psychology, business, health) and weaves a narrative rich in reading, reflection on ideas, and written responses.*

*Keywords: English for Academic Purposes, Language Teaching, Reading/Writing Instruction*

### Introduction

Second language writing has often been taught as an independent entity as if it were somehow divorced from reading. However, an integrated reading-writing approach can offer a more meaningful, content-driven experience for non-native speakers of English. Rather than simply throwing together some key features of traditional writing and reading text, it is our belief that celebrating the reciprocal, response relationship of reading and writing may have a more lasting impact on the second language learners' writing proficiency.

Clearly, reading is the food for writing, and writing is enriched by exposure to vast amounts of reading. It is no surprise that most prolific writers also tend to be compulsive readers. For our purposes, the integrated approach ensures that students are given the opportunity to follow the organic path from reading, reflecting on what they have read, to exploring their thoughts in writing. In addition, integration does not stop after students write their first draft. In fact, integration is further extended as students think about what they have written, revise their preliminary draft and read more for reference and cite other works.

In teaching L2 writing, we propose an integrated model that focuses on a series of thematic units revolving around popular academic disciplines, (e.g., psychology, business, health) and weaves a narrative rich in reading, reflection on ideas, and written responses. Our goal with these thematic units is to enable students to embark on an intellectual journey that resembles the journey they will take when they encounter their freshmen class curricula.

### A Thematic Journey through Academic Content

The integration of reading and writing plays out organically through a series of well-structured activities. Students will have the opportunity to discuss preview questions to build their interest in a

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number of issues raised in each academic area. For example, students address the question as to why identical twins separated at birth often exhibit similar characteristics when they examine the discipline of psychology. They will then share their reactions to some of these provocative questions in writing on a blog supported by their educational institution. Students will then interact with discipline-specific terminology to build their academic vocabulary. In the case of psychology, students will be introduced to some of the technical terms pertinent to the discipline, such as psychoanalysis, stimulus, and hypnosis. They will be given an overarching essay question to think about as they delve into the unit readings with the understanding that they will need to integrate some ideas from these readings into their unit essay. A good question related to the discipline of psychology may be whether human behavior can be modified. Moreover, the unit readings will be further utilized to illustrate such key reading skills as making inferences, identifying the topic and main idea and recognizing key patterns of organization within a text. The underlying implication of this exercise is that students will be able to incorporate parallel writing skills such as writing the thesis statement and paragraph development.

The unit journey continues with a free writing activity in response to a thought-provoking quote related to the academic discipline. Descartes' famous quote "I think, therefore I am" serves as an appropriate quote for this writing exercise. Continuing the thematic journey, students will be asked to write a summary of a unit reading of their choice, and to find a video clip related to the unit theme, both activities serving to deepen their understanding of the unit content. Finally, after interacting with a variety of input (readings and video), and some output (short writing activities), students will be better equipped to compose their unit essay.

This is true integration in action! Foundational reading and writing skills are woven into the students' journey and serve as important tools to guide their understanding and smoothen their path as they make their way through the reading and writing process.

## **Research Supporting a Thematic Approach**

The skill and drill approach to teaching L2 writing has been criticized by a number of scholars in recent years. Wexler (2015), for example, points out that this approach is problematic for L2 learners. She argues that "Spending hours finding the main idea can get pretty boring. But it's a particular problem for low-income students, because they're the least likely to acquire the kind of knowledge they need at home." While she admits that skills play a role in teaching L2 reading, she refers to the work of the cognitive scientist Daniel T. Willingham in making the claim that "you can't improve reading comprehension just by practicing free-floating skills. For students to understand what they're reading, they need relevant background knowledge and vocabulary".

In their groundbreaking investigation of designing integrated reading/writing courses, Raufman and Barrow (2015) interviewed L2 reading and writing instructors and learned that many instructors were frustrated with the traditional integrated curriculum. One of the instructors interviewed explained, "I did two papers that were not connected with anything that they read. A narrative paper and a descriptive, and those were the worst papers they wrote the entire semester. I need more models...which means more reading".

Based on the response they received from the instructors, Raufman and Barrow conclude that "Students struggle to transfer reading and writing skills to different contexts," especially academic ones such as history, psychology, political science, and sociology. Given the shortcomings of the traditional paradigm, it is imperative that students are exposed to a more dynamic model which integrates reading and writing organically.

## **Four Critical Goals of the Integrated Reading/Writing Model**

Our integrated model was conceived from the idea that four critical goals could be realized within a thematic, content-based approach. At the forefront of our vision is the understanding that second language readers and writers must be fully engaged in stimulating content as they acquire the college reading and writing skills that are key to their academic success. This multifaceted approach motivates students to become active readers and more comfortable with the task of reacting to text in written form. Rothman and Warsi (2016) argue that this approach also prepares them for reading and writing across the academic disciplines, builds their academic vocabulary through heavy reading exposure and writing usage, and last, but certainly not least, cultivates their critical thinking skills by giving them multiple opportunities to reflect on provocative, contemporary issues.

Here is a brief description of the four critical goals for developing writing skills in second language writers:



- 1. To encourage active reading and writing in response to text.** The integrated model strives to motivate students to become active readers and active writers by fostering intellectual inquiry through the exploration of contemporary themes related to the most popular academic disciplines. If students' curiosity is sparked, there is no stopping them! Working within this model, students will have ample opportunity to read stimulating articles on controversial topics, and to integrate some of what they have understood from these readings into their unit essays. They will also have significant opportunities to respond to text, whether it be in the form of reacting to classmates' postings on the class blog, summarizing a theme-related video clip they have chosen online, summarizing one of the unit readings, or developing their unit essay, which draws from the themes of the unit readings.

We believe that textbooks which focus on isolated reading and writing skills often leave developmental readers and writers uninspired and unmotivated to invest their time and effort reading them. We take the approach that there is no substitute for high-interest, integrated content that engages students. Clearly, reading and writing should be enjoyable and an intellectually stimulating experience!

The rationale for choosing thematic units focusing on academic disciplines is supported by Edington (2003) who discusses the benefits of content modules. She argues that thematic units

  - a. Provide a 'purpose for reading'.
  - b. Provide 'cultural literacy' in several academic areas.
  - c. Provide the opportunity for students to become academically and socially engaged in the classroom.
- 2. To prepare students for reading and writing across academic disciplines.**

The organic integration of reading and writing helps students prepare for the rigorous requirements of the courses that lie just around the corner. The thematic units cover a wide array of academic disciplines (psychology, sociology, business, health, literature, criminal justice, and more). This exposure to a variety of readings, involvement in discussions of contemporary topics in each academic field, practice with discipline-specific terminology, online research on famous people in each field, and opportunities to debate and share written responses on these themes gives students a valuable edge in their academic preparation. Moreover, many students in the developmental stage of their college careers have not decided on their majors, and reading and writing across the curriculum introduces them to the most popular academic disciplines and gives them a chance to explore potential areas of academic interest.
- 3. To build academic vocabulary through reading exposure and writing usage.**

Using this integrated model, students build their academic vocabulary through lots of exposure to thematic readings and discipline-specific terminology. Vocabulary development is reinforced through active usage of new words in written form. Students are encouraged to work with new vocabulary terms as they blog with other students on academic content, write summaries of unit readings, and develop their unit essays.
- 4. To cultivate critical thinking skills through reflection on provocative, contemporary issues.** It is our belief that college students most effectively develop their reading and writing skills when they are given the chance to express themselves, to bounce ideas off of each other and to weigh in on relevant contemporary issues. Using the discipline of psychology as an example, students are asked to consider if human behavior can be changed; similarly, in the thematic unit on Criminal Justice, they are left to ponder whether the police fulfill their promise to "protect and serve" their communities; additionally, the unit on Business encourages students to reflect on the question of whether business and ethics can truly coexist. When students' interest and curiosity are piqued, they do more focused reading and invest more in developing their written responses. Students should be given guidelines to practice critical thinking skills as evaluating the relevance of web sites, asking pertinent questions as they read, assessing the validity of an author's argument and the strength of their own arguments. This is in keeping with the Talmudic approach to learning, which stipulates that students never accept things at their face value and always question the basic premise of contentious claims.



## Conclusion

This paper provides the rationale and framework for an integrated thematic approach to teaching second language academic writing to adult non-native speakers of English. Recent research supports a radical departure from the traditional skill and drill approach to teaching L2 writing and suggests an organic integration of reading and writing as a more engaging and effective pedagogy. Using this approach, students embark on an intellectual journey, which will lead them to the attainment of knowledge across academic disciplines and higher proficiency in writing in a second language.

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