



BODHI

International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

An online, Peer reviewed, Refereed and Quarterly Journal

Vol : 2

No : 1

October 2017

ISSN : 2456-5571



**CENTRE FOR RESOURCE, RESEARCH &
PUBLICATION SERVICES (CRRPS)**

www.crrps.in | www.bodhijournals.com

STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE THE READING AND WRITING SKILLS OF THE LEARNERS

Divya Balachandran

*PhD Research Scholar,
Fatima Mata National College, Kollam, Kerala, India*

Dr. Clara Bernadette Reshma

Assistant Professor, Fatima Mata National College, Kollam, Kerala, India

Abstract

The teaching of reading is closely related to the teaching of writing as reading provides accurate models for writing. This might be one of the reasons for the development of language courses that focus on both these skills, though there are two other skills – listening and speaking- that are also essential for the learners to be considered proficient in a language. Learners have to listen to the language to speak fluently and accurately. This was hardly possible before as the gadgets like mobile phones and laptops were not widely used. There was also lack of well-trained teachers who could teach through the target language. This situation no longer exists now. Still the language courses in India are designed in such a way that listening and speaking skills are ignored. Though the focus has always been on reading and writing skills, the learners are not competent in these skills. This paper attempts to depict the various strategies that can be employed by the language teachers to develop the reading and writing skills of the learners. This paper also examines whether the theory of Multiple Intelligences can be used to enhance the reading and writing skills of the learners. It demonstrates how the theory can be utilized to create reading and writing tasks that will be both beneficial and appealing to the learners.

Introduction

Language teachers in the educational institutions in India focus on developing the reading and writing skills of the learners. Still the learners are not attaining the desirable competence in these skills. All stakeholders-administrators, teachers, students, parents, community members, and elected officials such as school board members, city councilors and state representatives-blame the learners for this, though they are not solely responsible for their lack of competence. What we need are not fingers pointing at the 'other' as the cause of the issue, but positive solutions. A joint effort on the part of all the stakeholders will definitely put an end to the problem.

This study attempts to explore and find an answer to the following questions:

How can reading and writing be taught effectively in a language class? What are the strategies that can be employed to teach these skills?

Can Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences be used to enhance the reading and writing skills of the learners?

Receptive and Productive Skills

Teachers have to develop both the receptive skills (reading and listening) and productive skills (writing and speaking) of the learners if they expect their learners to be proficient in using the target language, English.

"Receptive skills are the ways in which people extract meaning from the discourse they see or hear" (Harmer 199). A learner is said to be competent in using the receptive skills only if he/she is able to comprehend thoroughly what he/she reads and listens. Reading and listening skills are called receptive skills because the learners receive the language input and decode the meaning to comprehend what they hear or read.

Speaking and writing are referred to as the productive skills of language. To develop these skills learners have to use the language they have acquired and produce speech or written texts that others can listen or read and understand.

Learning a language involves developing both the receptive and productive skills.

Since this study is focused on reading and writing skills, the following sections will primarily deal with these skills.

The Purposes of Teaching Reading and Writing

Exposure to a language in any form- listening, speaking, reading and writing- is of great significance for a learner who is attempting to learn the language. Jeremy Harmer's view is that reading texts "provide opportunities to study language: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and the way we construct sentences, paragraphs and texts" (68). Fascinating and useful lesson plans accompanied by a lot of communicative tasks can be built around reading texts that are either prescribed for the learners or prepared by the teachers considering the needs of the learners. Harmer has pointed out that the reasons for teaching writing include reinforcement, language development, learning style and, most importantly writing as a skill in its own right" (79). Unlike face-to-face communication, writing is a reflective activity and provides learners the time they need to recall and use the language they have already acquired and to correct the errors that they make. Teaching writing is as important as teaching the other skills as the learners also need to learn the conventions of writing like they need to learn to read or speak with good accent.

Teaching Reading

Reading is a skill that needs particular attention as the process of reading involves a lot more than understanding the meaning of words. While teaching a reading text teacher should ensure that the learners understand the global idea of the text. A text may contain layers of meaning. The learners should be taught to decipher these meanings. The decision regarding how to teach this should be based on the present comprehension level of the learners and their prior knowledge. They should also be taught how to *scan* (for particular information) or *skim* (to get a general idea) through a text depending on the kind of text they are using. If a text is to be comprehended in detail the

learners should be asked to pay attention to the minutiae of the text they are reading. The teachers should also point out the differences between reading for pleasure and reading for learning. Reading for pleasure can be done at a pace the learner prefers or are capable of reading and based on the learners' interest in the texts.

In order to understand a text learners need to have something more than the knowledge of the language. They should have "pre-existent knowledge of the world" (Cook 69), which is often referred to as *schema*.

Each of us carries in our heads mental representations of typical situations that we come across. When we are stimulated by particular words, discourse patterns, or contexts such schematic knowledge is activated and we are able to recognize what we see or hear because it fits into the pattern we already know. (Harmer 199)

For instance, our schematic knowledge will help us to predict the contents of articles in a newspaper just by looking at the headlines. Harmer has pointed out that "prediction is a major factor in reading" (70). We can make predictions about a novel by seeing the book cover and title, and by reading the blurb of the book. Likewise, we can make learners predict the subject matter of the reading text using the title and the pictures in the text since they come to the class with their own schematic knowledge. This will raise their interest in the text and prepare them to listen attentively to the text. If the learners do not have adequate pre-existing knowledge about the contents of a reading text they may find it difficult to understand the text. In such situations teachers can help the learners by including details about the facts they are not familiar with as part of the pre-reading activity or the warm-up activity. Videos or pictures explaining the contents will be appropriate as learners will be interested in them.

Teachers should not restrict themselves to teaching the meaning and message of the text, vocabulary and grammar points in the text and pronunciation of new words and/or to making them answer questions based on the text. They should exploit the subject matter of the text and create tasks based on it to improve the reading and

writing skills of the learners. They can make even a totally boring text interesting by making learners do exciting and challenging tasks at the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages of teaching.

Teaching Writing

The writing skill can be developed through appropriate, interesting tasks. Generally learners are asked to write letters, e-mails, dialogues, essays, paragraphs and reports in a language class. Teachers may also ask learners to do creative tasks like writing poems, short stories and play scripts. Creative writing is a "journey of self-discovery, and self-discovery promotes effective learning" (Gaffield-Vile 31). The greatest advantage of using imaginative writing tasks is that the learners will be more motivated to use correct and appropriate language when they are asked to do this than when they are asked to write other written products like a letter, a report or a paragraph. As Penny Ur points out, "most people feel pride in their work and want it to be read" (169). To bolster the learners' 'product pride', teachers can ask them to read it in the class and may appreciate them for their work. Learners may find it difficult to write whole texts at the beginning stage. So they must be encouraged to write a few phrases and sentences before writing whole texts.

Usually writing is taught independently without any reference to the reading texts taught in the class. An integrated approach is more useful as the learners will be more comfortable to write about topics that they are familiar with. Teachers often make students do writing task as an individual work rather than a group work. Cooperative writing is very effective as the generation of ideas through discussion, reviewing and peer evaluation will benefit each learner in a group. Teachers will also be able to give detailed and constructive feedback to the small number of groups in a class, which might not be possible if individual work is given to each student.

Cooperative writing focuses on the process of writing and does not follow the product approach that concentrates on the end product of writing. In the process approach, the procedure of writing a piece of

work- brainstorming, drafting, reviewing, redrafting and 'publishing'- are meticulously done under the guidance of the teacher. This approach is time-consuming but is useful as it gets to the heart of the skills required while writing.

Teachers ought to give special attention to the teaching of conventions of writing as accurate use of these conventions is essential for the written text to be intelligible to the readers. Learners find it difficult to spell words correctly as there is no one-to-one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation. Teachers should draw the learners' attention to frequently recurring spelling errors and explain why they might be making those mistakes. This will raise the spelling 'consciousness' of the learners. There are well-established customs for punctuating a piece of writing which are to be taught through appropriate tasks if the learners are to use it aptly. Teachers need not intervene at every instance of error, but can make general statements about the errors the learners make while writing. The lay outs of the different genres of writing are different. Learners should be taught to use the lay outs appropriately to get their message across as clearly as they can.

The Multiple Intelligences Theory and Teaching of Reading and Writing Skills

Howard Gardner introduced the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) through his book, *Frames of Mind*, which unexpectedly became an influential book that brought about changes in the field of teaching. In this book he argued that there are seven intelligences: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. Later he added two more intelligences to his list of intelligences- naturalist and existentialist intelligences.

In the book, *The Multiple Intelligences of Reading and Writing*, Thomas Armstrong advocated that "there is no one best way to teach reading and writing skills, in part because each person is so differently organized neurologically, and that the best attitude to adopt in any

literacy program is a multiple-solution focus" (7). The MI theory is of great use to the language teachers who are trying to develop the reading and writing skills of the learners as it provides multiple ways to teach these skills. Teachers can create a variety of tasks incorporating the different intelligences and make the learners do it individually or in groups in the classroom. These tasks will be more appealing to the learners than the usual language tasks that tap only the linguistic intelligence of the learners. They will also remove the boredom of doing similar kind of tasks. The greatest advantage of using MI tasks is that while catering to the needs of individual learners, it also optimizes learning for the whole class within the limited time available.

The following lesson plan adapted from Armstrong's book *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* suggests a way to create lesson plans using MI theory as an organizing frame work:

Sample Eight-Day MI Lesson Plan

Level: Primary

Objective: To understand the function of the punctuation marks: the question mark, period, comma, and exclamation point.

Monday (*Linguistic Intelligence*): Students read sentences having examples of each punctuation mark, complete a worksheet requiring them to fill in the punctuation marks, and then listen to a verbal explanation of the function of punctuation marks.

Tuesday (*Spatial Intelligence*): The teacher draws on the board graphic images that correspond in meaning and form to each mark. Question mark = a hook, since questions "hook" us into requiring an answer; exclamation point = a staff that you pound on the floor when you want to exclaim something; a period = a point, since you've just made your point, plain and simple; and a comma = a brake pedal, since it requires you to temporarily stop in the middle of a sentence. Students can be divided into groups and asked to make up their own images and then place them as pictures in the sentences provided in the chart paper of each group (with different colors assigned to different marks).

Wednesday (*Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence*):

The teacher asks students to use their bodies to form the shapes of the different punctuation marks as a student reads a story requiring these marks (e.g., a curved body posture for question mark).

Thursday (*Musical Intelligence*): Students in a group make up different sounds for the punctuation marks and then make these sounds in unison (after discussing with the group members) as a student from another group read sentences requiring the use of the four marks.

Friday (*Logical-Mathematical Intelligence*):

Students form pairs. Each pair has a box divided into four compartments, each of which is assigned a punctuation mark. Each pair sorts sentence stubs with missing punctuation marks (one per sentence stub) into the four compartments according to the punctuation needed.

Monday (*Interpersonal Intelligence*): Students form groups of four to six. Each student has four cards, and each card has a different punctuation mark written on it. The teacher places a sentence requiring a given punctuation mark on the overhead projector. As soon as students see the sentence, they discuss with their group members and the group leader tosses the relevant card in the center of their group's circle. The first group to throw in a correct card gets five points, the second four, and so on.

Tuesday (*Intrapersonal Intelligence*): Students are asked to close their eyes and create their own sentences using each of the punctuation marks; the sentences should relate to their personal lives (e.g., a question they'd like somebody to answer, a statement they feel strongly about, a fact they know that they'd like others to know about). They are then asked to share it before the whole class by writing it on the black board.

Wednesday (*Naturalist Intelligence*): Students are asked to assign a flower to each of the punctuation marks. As the teacher (or a student) reads a passage, the students show the flower corresponding to each punctuation mark.

The lesson plan provided above shows how to create tasks using each of the intelligences. Teachers

can either follow this model or may create more innovative tasks by amalgamating two or more intelligences for a task.

Conclusion

Teachers undoubtedly play a major role in the teaching-learning process inside the classroom. They can make learning a target language appear less daunting and tedious by means of intelligent strategies that are less time-consuming and will produce desirable results. Language learning can be made exciting by using texts and tasks that are interesting and at the same time challenging and by creating a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom. As learners come to the class with their own individual strengths, teachers can make use of it to increase the learning that happens in the classroom. MI theory can be used to improve the language skills of the learners by creating tasks using the learners' preferred intelligences.

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