



USING THE WRITING WORKSHOP TO IMPROVE READING

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Abstract:

The study investigated the effect of using the writing workshop to improve reading in senior secondary school students. Most public schools in Nigeria do not explicitly teach reading or writing to students, hence most of these students have poor reading and writing competences. This study applied the writing workshop strategy (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) to teach reading to a small group of secondary school students in a rural community in Ezinihitte, Mbaise, near Owerri, South East Nigeria. The study employed the qualitative method of participant observation. A comparison of students' reading and writing performance before and after the study showed that the treatment had a positive effect on the reading and writing competences of the subjects. It was concluded that using the writing workshop to teach students who are being prepared for the senior secondary school certificate examinations to actively read and write in the English language will go a long way to improve their competence in both reading and writing the language. It is recommended that both the government and all stakeholders should adopt this strategy alongside other useful ones to improve the performance of students in internal and external examinations.

Keywords: writing workshop, active reading, mini-lesson, conference time

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1. Introduction

The teaching of reading and writing is said to be very important if instruction in literacy is to yield the expected dividend in the learners (Shanahan, 1995 – 2003). This is because the two are closely related and one cannot be taught to the exclusion of the other. Both the writer and the reader make meaning as they read and write (Valeri-Gold & Deming, 2000). As Bolt and Hansen (1986) point out, reading and writing facilitate one another because both need information and “*information is the key to successful reading and writing ...*” (p. 165). They illustrate that writers use information gathered from reading to write while readers read the information put down by writers while also making use of knowledge of the writer’s use of structure to construct meaning from the text. The learners’ knowledge of the options which writers make (because they themselves write) as well as “aesthetic devices” used by authors also enhance the learner’s ability to read and comprehend. Thus, the act of writing (or being a writer) would enhance a learner’s ability to read critically and comprehend. According to Glen (2007), the teaching of reading and writing together does not only ensure that students develop critical thinking but also helps them develop into more proficient readers and writers.

1.1 Previous Research

Scholars have pointed out the benefit of using writing to teach reading or vice versa as well as the use of writing workshops in the enhancement of the literacy development of English Language Learners at various levels. For example, King (2012) employed the writing workshop in a pre-kindergarten class to enhance the subjects’ “*understanding of letters and concepts of print*” (p 400). Montelongo, Herter, Ansaldo & Hatter (2010) made use of direct instruction to teach expository reading and writing in the middle-school. The result of this action research showed that the subjects improved remarkably in their ability to read and write expository text. Thus the teaching of reading and writing in the complementary mode had a positive effect on the subjects. Olateju (2003) points out that writing helps students to master reading which enables them to excel both in school work and life outside the classroom. She also posits that the keeping of journals by students is a critical way in which the complementary roles of reading and writing can be made manifest. As she indicates, students learn to write by writing about books they have read and this enhances the critical thinking skills essential in both reading and writing. Olateju also notes that the use of learning logs is of great advantage to students who use it to write freely and to respond to books and other texts they have read, this thus illustrates the importance of the reading/writing connection in the development of literacy in learners. According to Christopher (2012), the level of encouragement given

to children in activities that relate to language and literacy will determine the level of language skills they will develop and use. It is for this reason that this study made use of the writing workshop to teach reading to a small group of subjects.

2. Method

In June 2016, during the later part of the third school term, a senior secondary school (SS 1) student brought a draft of a story she had written (which she patterned on a story of a similar title which had been published as a book) to the first author to read and evaluate for her. Very delighted at the girl's enterprise, the researcher set out to read the story. But to her dismay, the text was unreadable because, apparently, no one had taught the girl the basics of language use such as spelling, nouns, verbs, agreement, tenses, number, and mechanics, etc.

When the long vacation commenced, the researcher decided that the period would be a good opportunity to address the girl's needs in a group of other students. Thus, the researcher assembled a small group of eight students, (SS1), for a writing workshop. The classes held two and half hours a day, three times a week for six weeks. The researcher acted as a participant observer as she conducted the workshop herself. The subjects were requested to bring two exercise books of 60 leaves each, one of which was used as their own personal journal while the other was used for writing the class assignments. The researcher kept her own field notes in which she made anecdotal notes of the goings-on in the class room.

2.1 The Writing Workshop

Scholars have described the writing workshop as consisting of at least four segments (King, 2012; Onukaogu, 2003; Bolt & Hansen, 1986). These are: the teacher directed mini lesson about writing, the free writing time, the author share time, and the teacher/student conferencing. The researcher employed a modified writing workshop structure to which was added a segment for reading. This modified structure consisted of the mini lesson, the reading time, the free writing time, the author share time and the teacher/student conference time.

At the introductory class, the researcher asked the students why they thought it was important for them to be able to read and write proficiently in the English language. Jane (all students' names are pseudonyms) answered that it was because they needed to pass their examinations and Jerry said it was because they needed to show that they have been to school. The students were then asked to say the last time they read a book, magazine, etc. for leisure, i.e., outside the academic requirement of school work. Out of the eight students (four boys and four girls), five said they had read novels

the previous week (it turned out the novels they had read were class recommended texts for the just ended term), one had read mathematics during the week and one had not read any book or text outside class texts for the past two months.

To be able to know what the language status of the students were, the researcher asked them to read aloud a chapter of the novel, *The Potter's Wheel* (Ike, 1973). While each student read, the researcher and the other students listened as they read along silently in their own copies of the text. With the exception of one student (Sandra) who was able to observe, to some extent, the punctuation marks in the text and to pronounce the words properly, the rest of the students were reading at word level and were unable to flow appropriately with the sentences. This made it difficult for them to comprehend the story in the chapter because when asked to retell what they had read, most of them looked lost. The students were also asked to write a story of an event which they had witnessed so that the researcher could have a balanced view of the reading and writing needs of all the students in the group. Such inadequacies as spelling errors, inability to use singular or plural verbs appropriately, not knowing when a sentence or noun should be written with an initial capital letter, very lengthy and unwieldy sentences and inability to punctuate their writing, etc. filled their work. For example, the paragraph below was written by Jason:

"Incident of death

It was on 21st may 2012, the Werther was cool with the brightness of the sun. everybody was happy playing While some telling stories about What had happened to them or What the had expirence While the old men Where eating and dinking palmWine and craking jokes."

Nnenna wrote the following paragraph:

"What I have witness before

The day I went to a birthday it was the birthday of my friend who is in Lagos, I went there on the 26th of may 2013, while the birthday is on the 28th of the same month. On that day the birthday stated on 3.30 pm on the evening."

With all these at hand, the researcher then set up the workshop which lasted for a period of six weeks.

A. The teacher directed mini-lesson (30 minutes):

Because of the areas of weakness noticed in the students' reading and writing, we decided that the mini lessons would focus on the writing process, parts of speech and

their functions in the sentence structure. Other lessons were given on mechanics, etc. After each particular lesson, the students were asked to write a story of their choice so that they can practice and make use of the lesson they had received. Each lesson lasted thirty minutes. Subsequent lessons were determined by the learners' areas of need.

B. The reading time (35 minutes):

The researchers chose one standard literature text for use during the workshop – *The Potter's Wheel* by Chukwuemeka Ike. This book was chosen because, according to literacy scholars, children should be exposed to books and other texts which are models of the highest and best use of written language. Also, the book was set in Igbo land (Eastern Nigeria) and as such the students would have a rich background knowledge with which to deal with the text. This would help them understand the use of language proficiently and in authentic contexts.

Students were divided into two groups of four each. The teacher modeled oral reading to the students so as to exemplify how to read with fluency while observing the correct pauses according to the punctuations, and with expression. This enabled the students to pattern their own reading correctly. Then the students were asked to read aloud individually or in groups, taking turns either to read a certain number of paragraphs or entire pages alternately. While they read, the students themselves corrected each other when they made mistakes in pronunciation or when they failed to observe the punctuation marks or failed to use the correct expression. At the end of the read aloud, the students were then given a few minutes to read the same portion silently on their own.

C. Writing time (40 minutes):

The learners were often asked to retell in writing the portions of the stories they had read or the stories read so far. This was to assess their level of comprehension and to also help them practice writing in real context. They wrote this in the class notebook which they submitted to the researcher at the end of the class each day. They were also instructed to read a certain number of pages or chapters at home preparatory to the next class. They were also instructed to note down in their personal journals the difficult words they encountered as they read, their meanings if possible; to make their own sentences with such words, and to note any questions they might have or anything that struck them either in their reading or outside it. They also chose a topic on which to write and to submit their writing at the next class.

The researcher checked their writing at home or during the writing period and wrote out on the board the incorrect spellings, punctuations or grammatical usages found in their work. The students were then asked to point out what was wrong with the sentences or words and then to give the correct version. When they were not getting

it, the researcher provided them with a clue through asking questions that led them to identify the errors or get the correct usage.

The researcher also provided the students with specially prepared reading response sheet (Inyang & Onukaogu, 2003) to help them think about and comprehend the stories as they read and to write extensively.

D. The sharing time (25 minutes):

Students were shared into two groups of four. Each group would read and discuss the essays they had written at home the previous day (they were asked to use narration only). The author would read her/his story while the rest of the group listened and asked questions or made comments on the story or language of the writer. The researcher listened to the groups as they shared and sometimes the students asked for her opinion on some issues on which they disagreed. At the end of the classes each day, the researcher noticed that the students discussed some of the errors in their reading or writing with each other as they walked home.

E. The teacher/student conference time (20 minutes):

The researcher usually held conferences with the students either individually or as a group. During the writing time, the researcher would go round the class as the students wrote, looking at what they were writing and discussing with some of them on writing issues peculiar to each of them. At the end of the class each day, the researcher also looked at the comments she made on the work of the students and discussed with them about their writing and their oral reading. She would also discuss the questions or observations raised by the students during this time. The students' writings were graded but no scores were given. This was to avoid the students becoming discouraged. Their errors were pointed out in a separate page from their write-ups and they were asked to note and correct them by rewriting the passage in question or in subsequent ones.

3. Results/Findings

It was observed that the students were not used to being asked to read or write during classes. Those called upon to read were shy and reluctant to do so. Their reading was initially full of flaws while their writing was full of spelling and punctuation errors. But as the workshop progressed, they started paying attention to the lessons and began slowly to improve in their literacy skills.

3.1 Discussion

At the beginning of the workshop, the students' oral reading as well as their writing was not what one would have expected. As they were asked to read aloud from the text

selected for the workshop, it became apparent that the students had a weak foundation in reading and writing in the English language. Even Igbo words and expressions used in the book seemed difficult for them to pronounce properly (perhaps because the Igbo words were written in a dialect different from their own?). The students would read without paying any attention to the punctuation marks in the text; they also read without paying much attention to the words in the text and as a result would pronounce words wrongly from their mind without actually reading the words as they were written in the text. So the researcher would model reading, ask the students to read individually and to read chorally as a group. Their attention was consistently drawn to the need to observe the punctuation marks in the text. Mini lessons were addressed to punctuation and mechanics and the students were asked to write self-selected stories in which they observed punctuations. Their attention was consistently forced back to the words in the text so that they would actually pronounce what was written in the text. They would also be made to spell out the words and pronounce them. They also read book chapters repeatedly and were allowed to move on to the next chapter when they had sufficiently observed the punctuations and pronunciations in the present chapters. As a result, after sometime, their reading began to improve as they now became conscious of punctuation marks and were made to actually read words as written in the text and not from their minds or whatever came into their mouth.

The main problems they encountered in their writing were the use of tenses, noun/verb agreement and spelling. To address this, mini lessons were organized to teach the parts of speech and their usage in the sentence structure. Their attention was also drawn to how these parts of speech (especially the nouns and the verbs) were used in sentences in the texts. At the end of each chapter, they were asked to retell the story in that chapter in writing. They were asked to write in their personal log the difficult words which they came across in each chapter. The researcher modeled for them how to find out the meanings of some words through the context in which the words occurred and allowed them to find out the contextual meanings of some of the words. They were encouraged to look up the meanings of other words in the dictionary, to learn the spellings and use the words to make their own sentences.

The researcher encouraged the students to make connections between the text and their personal life and experiences. For example, after reading the first two chapters of the *Potter's Wheel*, the researcher asked the students if any of them was an only son or daughter or if they knew any of their friends who were. Two students indicated that they were the only daughters in their family but that their mothers did not pamper them as the main character's mother in the book did to him as her only son. One accepted that her father sometimes spoilt her a little.

After about four weeks of the workshop, the students started enjoying the text and would laugh at some funny scenes in the book while also discussing what the scenes reminded them of or what they liked or did not like about the characters. Their writing also started to improve as they paid more attention to the use of capital letters to start their sentences and the tenses of verbs and their agreement with the nouns they used as subjects or objects of their sentences. For example, when asked to retell a chapter in the book, Daniel wrote:

“Early in the morning, Obu went to his father’s room and dragged out the bicycle. It was locked so he searched for the key and later found it on his father’s bed. He carried it outside the compound...”

While Jane wrote:

“Mazi Laza had wanted to go to the farm and Mama Obu did n’t want Obu to go and told him to stay inside until everyone left the house. Obu told his mother to bring out his food in a corner and not to lock his father’s room; that he wants to ride his father’s bicycle.

Their spellings also began to improve.

4. Conclusion

From the facts observed at the beginning of the study, it is evident that most of the students being prepared for the senior secondary school certificate examination, especially in the rural areas, have not been grounded in the act of reading and writing. This is evident in their below grade level reading and writing. This is not because they cannot learn but because there is a general apathy in the school system towards encouraging students to become readers and writers in the English language classroom. As Amuseghan (2007) advocates, *“learners should be able to effectively read, comprehend critically as well as engage efficiently in expressive and creative writing.”* To achieve this, learners need to be made to come face to face with the fact that in order to achieve in their studies, they must actively read and write in the language classroom, in the first instance, and in all other subject classes in the school curriculum. This is confirmed by the observation that as the students in this study continued to be confronted with extensive reading and writing through the writing workshop, their apathy began to melt away and they started reading ahead of the class, and were very excited to share their thoughts on the text with the class. They started making connections with the

stories, telling about their experiences similar to some in the stories; they also pointed out things they liked or did not like, especially about a mother so pampering a child that he becomes useless or his/her siblings feeling unloved or unwanted. Above all, they started to develop their own stories which they hope the researcher will help them publish some day.

Though their oral and written language continued to slowly improve, it was still far from the ideal any one would wish for. Due to the short period of time (six weeks for the study) of the holiday, (the researcher had to promise that the workshop would continue until the students left for school to start the new session), the workshop had to come to an end. But it is hoped that the interest and awareness generated in these students will be sustained through the new school year and indeed their academic career. It is also hoped that stake holders in the education sector would ensure that there is regular retraining of teachers, especially in current practices in literacy as practiced by other countries, such that reading and writing workshops, literature circles, book clubs and the like will become common place practices in our schools. This will help improve the language use, reading and writing proficiency of Nigerian students and school leavers, thus equipping them for further studies and for life in the larger society.

4.1 Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made.

- Schools and their proprietors should institute reading and writing programmes that will cause students to see reading and writing as a natural part of their academic and personal lives. This will improve proficiency in the language as well as the academic performance of students at all levels.
- Professional development of teachers should be taken seriously, as this would equip them with research-based principles and strategies to develop the literacy skills of the students.
- Government and privately owned schools should create a forum where reading and writing workshops and other instructional methods that will encourage extensive reading and writing in students will be introduced and sustained both for the teachers and their students.

All these will improve the reading and writing competence of school graduates at all levels and equips them for the academic, business and other endeavours of the future.

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