Voice And Dialogue In Teaching Reading/Writing To Qatari Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an attempt to improve the reading comprehension and writing skills of students coming from an oral culture. The proposed approach involves using voice and dialogue – understood literally and metaphorically – as a tool in teaching students how to engage texts and write with a reader in mind. The author discusses a pilot study incorporated into a writing course in the Pre-medical Education Program at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar.

Keywords: Voice; Reading Aloud; Writer-Reader Dialogue; Oral Culture

INTRODUCTION

Coming from an oral culture, Arab college students frequently struggle with academic reading and writing tasks, especially if they attend schools following a North American style curriculum. The issue is not just insufficient linguistic proficiency but also lack of cultural information and limited experience with Western conventions of academic reading and writing (Ayari, 1996; Mourtaga, 2004; Synovate, 2007). In the Gulf region, it is not unusual to hear orality mentioned as an impediment to developing literacy. In the context that privileges spoken language, the tendency to put blame for poor college readiness on the lack of reading and writing culture seems understandable, albeit unproductive. Unfortunately, simply warning students not to “write as they speak” or exhorting them to “read more” is not very helpful. Perhaps bridging the divide between spoken and written discourse by “embracing contraries” (Elbow, 2007, p. 1) and showing what the two discourses have in common constitutes a better approach. It seems that the practice of oral reading used to sensitize students to voice in text and the dialogue between the author and his/her audience can build more engaged readers and stronger writers.

PROPOSED APPROACH

Peter Elbow, the best known advocate of “bringing speech back into writing” (2007, p. 3), points out that “voice” has given rise to many controversies in composition studies and consequently all but disappeared from pedagogical discussions. Blaming this situation on the vagueness with which the term has been used, Elbow singles out the following ways of understanding the term voice: audible voice (the sounds in a text), dramatic voice (the character or implied author in a text), recognizable or distinctive voice (style), having a voice (authority) and presence (identity, self, “real voice,” subject position). As he notes, in the context of reading and writing instruction, it is voice understood as “presence” that is most controversial. Yet the complexity of the concept of identity or subject position should not obscure the benefits of bringing voice back into classroom practice. For his part, Elbow extols the value of reading aloud and proposes that voice, both in the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word, be considered “a practical tool that we can use rather than just fight about” (Elbow, 2007, p. 21).

It is hard not to agree that the simple, though undervalued, activity of reading out loud can be turned into a practical tool. First of all, the practice of reading out loud helps readers to interpret and engage a text. Thus, for example, it can be helpful in disambiguating the meaning of a passage, revealing irony or highlighting the “voiceprint” of a character or narrator. Although one tends to forget it, “hearing the words is a persuasive fact of reading” (Elbow, 2007, p. 7); consequently, making the text audible builds on the “natural” way readers approach texts.

In addition to improving reading comprehension, reading aloud can facilitate students' growth as writers. Elbow promotes it as especially useful before and after the act of composing an essay – first for brainstorming and then for revision and editing. In the stage of gathering material, giving voice to the silent process of thinking helps one to crystallize ideas. Similarly, reading out loud one's draft makes it easier to notice problems with clarity, repetition or incompleteness. Even ESL speakers can catch and correct some errors in grammar and punctuation when they hear what they wrote.

Furthermore, when students develop the habit of reading out loud in the process of negotiating with their own texts, they are encouraged to write with the reader in mind; as Elbow puts it, "it is the *hearing* of your own words that serves to get you out of the writer-consciousness into the audience-consciousness" (Elbow, 1981, p. 36). Likewise, good writers "talk on paper" (Elbow, 1981, p. 67). Although the connection between speech and writing may remain invisible or ignored, it is undeniable. To quote another expert in the field, "Good readers... grow out of good speakers and reciters" (Havelock, 1991, p. 21).

The practice of reading aloud can also facilitate unpacking the metaphorical meaning of the terms voice and dialogue in the context of reading/writing instruction. An ESL instructor may choose not to enter the realm of controversy over voice in the sense of authority or "subject position" (Elbow, 2007, p. 7). However, all students benefit from being made aware of the transactional nature of reading and writing. On the most rudimentary level, dialogic engagement with a text can be explained as creating meaning through identifying and interpreting textual clues planted by the writer. Thus it involves asking questions and "talking back" to the text. Voice annotation, "talking" with the narrator or the inhabitants of the fictional world encourages deep reading as well as self-reflection. Likewise, for a writer, imagining a dialogue with a sympathetic or adversary reader results in writing a clearer, more analytical argument (Elbow, 1981, p. 67). For all the above stated reasons, making students hear a text as a polyphony of voices, to use Bakhtin's term, can benefit both expert and novice readers and writers, regardless of whether they are using their mother tongue or a second/foreign language.

Highlighting the interconnectedness of the oral and written communication can be especially effective in the Middle East, where English is the lingua franca, but the population's literacy skills are often less than adequate, and where to a degree greater than anywhere else, readers see themselves as outsiders to the authority of the text. It needs to be added that the proposed approach of using oral reading and emphasizing the dialogic nature of the writer – reader relationship is meant to augment rather than substitute for common pedagogical practices. Hence it can be easily incorporated into a reading/writing curriculum and aid students with a wide range of proficiency levels.

PILOT STUDY

The following is a brief description of an attempt to implement the above-described approach in a first-year writing seminar at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. The purpose of the pilot project was to determine if the practice of reading aloud and attending to voice and dialogue in the literal and metaphorical meanings of the terms would improve students' attitude to reading and build their writing proficiency. The goal was to teach the cohort how to engage in critical reading (i.e. ask questions of the text, identify multiple points of view, reflect on the implied reader and the actual reader) as well as how to write with the audience in mind (i.e. address the needs of the reader in terms of coherence and cohesion, and engage the reader on the cognitive and affective level).

Many Qatari students are not used to interrogating texts and are not familiar with the Western convention of writing with the audience in mind. More often than not, their educational experience with reading prior to entering college is limited to answering multiple choice questions or discovering the "right answer" to the question of what a given passage is about. Many never read fiction or practice active reading while others are exposed to linguistically or culturally inaccessible materials they find irrelevant. Not surprising, they seldom become strategic readers or find motivation to develop the habit of reading extensively (Thompson-Panos, 1983; Bendriss & Golkowska, 2011; Shannon, 2003). Similarly, in writing, Qatari university students often start with a vague notion of the reader-writer responsibilities. Even if they are familiar with the term "audience," it frequently remains just an abstraction for them. Lacking linguistic resources and knowledge of implicit and explicit norms of Western written discourse, they find it hard to meet their readers' needs in terms of clarity or engagement. Such students need both knowledge of norms and intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 56). It was hoped that focus on voice and

dialogue would encourage the participants in the study to see written discourse as a form of communication in which they can participate with some confidence and anticipation of pleasure.

The approach was tested in four semesters with four different groups of freshmen ranging from 8 to 11 students in a section. Altogether 39 students participated. The pilot study involved an introductory module and a series of activities regularly incorporated throughout the semester into classroom discussions, peer review workshops, individual student conferences and homework assignments. In the first week of the semester, as part of the introductory module, the following topics were discussed:

1. Similarities and differences between spoken and written discourse:
 - a. The role of context in assigning meaning to utterances
 - b. Words as a key to the speaker's/writer's mind
 - c. Properties of speech absent in written communication (pitch, stress, intonation, non-verbal communication)
2. Transactional nature of reading and writing:
 - a. Reading as creating meaning
 - b. The writer - reader dialogue and its sociocultural determination
3. Intertextuality

Readings for the course were carefully chosen to form thematic units, with a number of texts representing different genres that speak to the same issue, each new text expanding and complicating the text before. Class discussions explored different ways in which writers use linguistic resources to create dialogic space with potential readers; the students were given excerpts exemplifying field and genre specific conventions as models to study and imitate. The sequence of writing assignments progressed from responding to a single text to working with multiple sources.

Throughout the semester the following activities were integrated into classroom practice and homework assignments:

- 1.1. Voice and interpretation of texts:
 - a. Reading aloud selected lines or passages to identify and resolve ambiguity (first modeled by instructor then done by students in pairs or groups)
 - b. Using think-aloud protocols or "voice annotation" i.e. reading out loud interspersed with comments about the meaning of the text from the point of view of the reader (clarification questions, response to the ideas in the text, emotional response, etc.)
 - c. Identifying passages that are ambiguous, ironic or insightful, reading them aloud, and explaining the reasons behind the chosen interpretation (done in class and assigned in audio-journals or oral reports)
- 1.2. Voice and writing:
 - a. Speaking to brainstorm ideas
 - b. Oral reports: Explaining the main idea of a writing assignment and its organization
- 1.3. Oral reading and writing:
 - a. Students reading out loud to themselves to revise and edit
 - b. Students reading drafts to each other in peer review workshops
 - c. Students reading parts of their essays in a conference with their instructor
2. The writer – reader dialogue: Engaging texts and writing to engage
 - a. Writing with the reader in mind: after writing the first draft students prepare questions for their peer reviewers and instructor to check whether they have successfully conveyed their intended meaning and involved the audience in the process
 - b. Providing reader based feedback: in peer review workshops students comment on their affective experience of reading a given draft
3. Texts speaking to other texts:
 - a. Entering a dialogue with a text that responds to an assigned reading (for example, reading a review, a scholarly article, a student essay, etc.) and incorporating a response to this text in an essay
 - b. Considering an alternative treatment of the same topic

- c. Exploring how the readings in the course echo, interrogate or respond to each other and other texts: re-combing, expanding and creating new thematic units

The usefulness of the approach was assessed by the students through semi-structured interviews, mid-term surveys and end of the semester evaluations. At the same time, information from the students' essays, participation in class discussions and individual conferences served as a basis for measuring the students' progress.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The practice of reading aloud was regarded as helpful by the participants in the pilot study. The students were especially appreciative of the benefits of oral reading in the process of revision. Reading aloud their essays in conferences with the instructor they were often able to correct errors in punctuation, grammatical agreement, and missing verbs (especially the verb "to be", frequently omitted by Arab students). In many cases they also noticed repetition and lack of transitions; occasionally, they became aware of faulty logic. It needs to be stressed that it took most students some time to develop the habit of reading aloud their drafts before handing them in or sharing them in peer review sessions. Focus group interviews established that initially this step was skipped due to time management problems. However, near the end of the semester most students read aloud their final drafts before submitting them to the instructor.

The focus on writing as a dialogue between the author and reader was an eye-opener to many of the study participants. The most noticeable change was a new attitude towards reading. The students actively engaged the assigned readings and seemed to enjoy talking about them. Their comments began to focus on issues such as the clues planted in the text by the author, gaps in information, role of dialogue in revealing a fictional character or multiple points of view. What is more, in the second half of the semester the class began to spontaneously put the texts in a dialogue with each other and comment on similar themes or rhetorical patterns. In terms of their own writing, five to six weeks into the semester approximately 70% of the students began to notice parts of their classmates' drafts that were not "reader friendly" and did not hesitate to comment on being confused, misinformed or disinterested. In their final essay they used more transitions and hedges, and wrote with more clarity.

DISCUSSION

The study presented here is exploratory in nature and has many limitations. To make it more rigorous, one would need a bigger sample, a sharper instrument, and a better balance of quantitative and qualitative data. At the same time, the pilot seems to have validated the usefulness of the proposed approach in the specific context for which it was designed. As noted above, the students' reaction was very encouraging and some gains undisputable.

CONCLUSION

While reading aloud remains an established practice in some ESL/EFL speaking classes, it seems under-utilized in teaching reading and writing. The proposed approach does not constitute a departure from commonly used pedagogies such as writing as a process or task based instruction. On the contrary, it works well with them, since it encompasses a variety of individual practices that can be tailored to meet the needs of student with different levels of proficiency. It is the cumulative effect of the practice of reading out loud as a tool of interpretation and revision combined with an emphasis on the dialogic aspect of writing that can encourage students from an oral culture to rethink their relationship to texts.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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