

# A Discourse Approach to Reading: Its Effect on the Academic Writing Skills of Secondary ESL Learners

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**Abstract**—This study investigated the effects of a discourse approach to reading on the academic writing skills of secondary ESL students on their ability to transfer their discourse skills from reading to writing. Two groups (experimental and control) each consisting of 30 high school students were involved in this study. The instruments used were the Comprehensive English Language Test, a researcher-prepared writing pretest, and another researcher-prepared writing posttest. The 480 writing compositions written by the two groups of subjects were first analyzed using Crombie's model of discourse analysis. Then, the numerical data were subjected to the statistical measures of t-test (for correlated and independent samples) and one-way ANCOVA. The study concluded that discourse approach to reading facilitates transfer of discourse skills from reading to writing.

**Keywords**—*discourse approach, academic writing skills, ESL learners, transfer of skills*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The students' attainment of academic success wherever is now the focus of attention in any educational institution. Educators and language teachers do struggle to discover the effective ways for developing students' language and academic skills that will empower them to become successful in their academic undertakings. In the Philippine educational setting,

although constant attempts to teach reading and writing effectively have been made, it is difficult to deny that a number of Filipino learners still find the task of reading a difficult one and also have difficulty in putting into writing what they have comprehended. Every year many schools are producing high school graduates who are not academically equipped and prepared to face the greater and more difficult tasks given in the tertiary level. Many students who enter college fail to manifest advanced academic literacy and are unprepared to function successfully in an academic context [1]. In most instances, these students have limited knowledge of and experience with academic discourse and often are unable to function beyond a basic literacy level within this context [2]. It is to be expressed with sadness that many of our colleges and even universities fail to prepare and empower students to adapt and respond to the rapid changes taking place in today's complex global society. The above situation projects the present condition of language education in the Philippines.

Responding to the urgent need to develop the reading and writing competencies of Filipino learners in order to keep them abreast with the rapid changes taking place in our technologically developing society, this study attempted to investigate the extent to which explicit instruction of discourse structures in reading will help students improve their

performance in their academic writing. That is, this study tried to discover an approach that would help students make use of their knowledge and skill of discourse in order to improve their academic writing performance.

#### A. *The Teaching of Reading and Writing*

In line with the growing concern with reading and writing are the unabated efforts of language professionals to improve instruction on these areas. Because the goal of every language instruction is to ensure language acquisition and academic success of the learners for them to be able to keep abreast of the rapid developments in the global society, the need to develop both their reading and writing skills has been greatly intensified. Responding to this felt need and following the noble idea that the four language skills are complementary and integrated, a modern treatment is given to these areas of reading and writing. Instead of dealing with these skills separately, language experts now uphold the concept about the interrelatedness and interdependence of reading and writing [3]-[7].

Nevertheless, within the field of language teaching, it was chiefly within the last few years that substantial studies have been conducted to explore the reading-writing connection. Some of these studies suggest the facilitating effect of reading practices upon writing [8]-[10] while other reviews [11]-[12] show the effect of writing practices upon reading. Interestingly, the objective which seems to be common in all of these efforts was to discover if the two modes of reading and writing are really directionally interdependent and if integrating them will significantly accelerate students' language acquisition.

Recent discussions on the reading-writing connection have proposed three somewhat interrelated hypotheses or models for the reading-writing relationship [13]: the directional hypothesis, the nondirectional hypothesis and the bidirectional hypothesis. The directional model focuses on input that is transferred in only one direction (reading to writing or writing to reading) and suggests that reading plays an important information source in the writing class. The nondirectional model focuses on the common underlying cognitive processes involved in reading and writing and claims that improvement in one domain will result in improvement in the other. Finally, the bidirectional model focuses on the multiple relations and interrelated processes that seem to constitute the reading-writing relationship and views that this relationship can be qualitatively different at different stages of development. The strength of this model lies in its claim that reading and writing are interactive as well as interdependent. These models show that they are interrelated since the fundamental concept that underlies these models is transfer of skills [13]. However, since these models or hypotheses presented above are quite new and young, they thus require further investigation.

Considering the above situation, this study aimed to find out whether discourse approach to reading would facilitate the transfer of discourse skills from the reading mode to the mode of writing.

#### B. *The Reading-Writing Connection*

Following the theory of integrated language skills is the theory that in language learning, reading and writing processes are interrelated [14]. A number of studies in language acquisition provide evidence that a relationship between reading and writing exists [13].

In this review, the researcher considers the comprehensive discussion of Eisterhold ( 1990 ) about the reading-writing connection. Among language researchers, she has been found to be the only one who formulated testable theories that seem to underlie the reading-writing relationship. The researcher finds Eisterhold's discussion on the reading-writing connection of great relevance to the study.

Studies of reading-writing link suggest three somewhat interrelated hypotheses which she preferred to describe as models [13]. The models' distinguishing characteristic is that they reflect the direction in which input is understood to be transferring from one modality ( eg. reading ) to the other ( in this case, writing ).

The first hypothesis views the reading-writing connection as *directional*. In this model, reading and writing are viewed as sharing similar structural components that elements acquired in one modality can be used in the other. A concrete case, for example is that, one's ability to recognize a text pattern in a reading passage would eventually enable him to generate the same pattern in writing. However, with the model's proposition maintaining that transfer of structural information can proceed in only one direction, researchers were led to figure out whether transfer moves from reading to writing or from writing to reading.

The *reading-to-writing model* of the *directional hypothesis* is found to be the most common pattern. Working within this model, researchers claim that reading influences writing but assert that writing knowledge is not at all useful in reading. This model finds strong supports from related theories of language acquisition maintaining that learners acquire inputs first ( through reading ) before they can actually generate outputs ( writing ).

There are studies that find supports to the reading-to-writing model. In a study, it was found out that children's writing reflect the structures and styles of basal readers used in class [8]. The findings confirm that transfer of structures move from reading to writing. Another study investigated the effects of instruction in using text structure to recall expository text and of instruction that emphasized writing expository text. [9]. The findings showed that instruction in writing did not have any significant effects in both reading and writing, but instruction in reading influenced both. What is important to point out in their study is that their findings indicate that explicit instruction seems to be a necessary condition for transfer to take place.

Another study which utilized a more indirect approach revealed supportive findings [15]. Their central premise was that students pick up rhetorical knowledge (global information) from reading and use it in writing. As such, rhetorical knowledge might be taught indirectly by exposing

students to single model of text type. After giving the students (whose grade levels range from grade 3 through college graduate level) a suspense story, a restaurant review, and a concrete fiction based on a French genre, they found that a single model of a text type had a positive effect on the students' writing performance. Although the effects differed depending upon the type of text, the grade and the students' economic status, they explained that in the learning process, readers note distinctive features and patterning in text which were made explicit to them and then they relate this to preconceived schemata of text types. Noteworthy in their study was that although an indirect instruction of text patterning was employed, such instruction facilitated transfer of knowledge from reading into writing.

However, in a survey of research on reading and writing relationships, some studies revealed a contradicting findings [9], [11]. The study specifically reported that additional reading was more effective than either grammar or extra writing practice but explicit reading instruction was found to be generally ineffective in improving writing [11]. Her survey report then suggests that what appears to be essential, and probably sufficient enough for transfer to occur from reading to writing is exposure to large amounts of input.

From this apparent contradiction arise two testable hypotheses: 1) explicit instruction is an important factor in the transfer of information; 2) exposure to large amounts of input alone is sufficient for transfer to occur.

In an attempt to settle this contradiction, relevant researches on reading-writing connections were reviewed and reported that several studies yielded significant results when students were taught reading strategies by examining structures applicable to both reading and writing [16]. This means then that explicit instruction in reading can be that effective in improving writing only when it focuses on a common element. Moreover, it reported that there seemed to be no automatic transfer from general reading improvement courses to written composition. Such findings weaken the hypothesis that plain exposure to inputs is sufficient for transfer to occur.

On the other side of the directional model, some researchers support the *writing-to-reading model* which reported that a number of studies suggest that writing activities such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and outlining can be significantly useful for improving reading comprehension and retention of information [11]]. Likewise, a review of some studies reported that direct instruction in sentence, paragraph, and discourse structure for writing significantly improves reading ability or a useful reinforcement to reading [12], [16]-[20].

Documented literature and studies seem to support the directional model, be it reading-to-writing or writing-to-reading, with its contention that transfer of information proceeds in only one direction. However, as can be noticed from these evidences, putting together those studies that support the reading-to-writing model and those that support the writing-to-reading model allows for another theoretical explanation about the reading-writing relationship. This new concept is projected by the fact that transfer can actually move

in either direction: reading to writing or writing to reading. Thus another hypothesis was formulated.

The second hypothesis views the reading-writing relationship as *nondirectional* [13]. This model is characterized in such a way that reading and writing are viewed as having a single underlying proficiency and that these two share a common cognitive process for constructing meaning.

Some study claim that that reading and writing are both constructive processes and that the reciprocal relationship between them is cognitive in nature. Because of this cognitive link between reading and writing, and having a common underlying proficiency or knowledge base, it was inferred that transfer of information can actually occur in either direction [21-[25], [5]. Thus, researchers assume that explicit instruction in either domain ( reading or writing ) will demonstrate effects on both. It is also assumed that improvement in one domain eventually results in improvement in the other. Several studies which are supportive of the nondirectional hypothesis have been quoted.

A study also investigated the effects of story schema training on the reading and writing abilities of fifth grader pupils [26]. The findings showed that the experimental group recalled more text structures in previous and new selections and produced more text structure categories in writing leading to a conclusion that children would readily apply story schema to related reading and writing tasks as a manifestation of transfer if instruction is so designed to facilitate such transference.

Another study investigated the relationship between the recognition and production of different text structures by college students [10]. These text structures include description, sequence, enumeration, and comparison and contrast. They found that the reading-writing relationship was significant for all the text structures except description. The results yielded that the subjects' ability to recognize related details consistent with the topic and text structure in a written passage was related to the ability to generate related details congruent with the topic and text structure in a writing task. It was also found that high ability students were more aware of intrusive information than were low ability students. With these results, Hiebert, Englert, and Brennan [10] were led to conclude that similar knowledge bases about text structures underlie reading and writing. They also concluded that the writer is guided by his knowledge of text structure which enhances his ability to generate sentences congruent with the given topics and text structures.

Common underlying knowledge base for reading and writing exist and that comprehension and production of text patterns use some similar cognitive and linguistic skills, as well as some separate processes like reading particular structures valuable for writing. [27]. However, these research evidences seem to focus on the cognitive relationship between reading and writing. Furthermore, they reflect that the relationship is correlational and such does not actually project an interactive model which those evidences supporting the directional hypothesis seem to suggest. From this point of

understanding arises the third hypothesis which labels the *bidirectional hypothesis*.

The bidirectional hypothesis is the most complex of the three hypotheses [13]. This model holds that reading and writing are both interactive and interdependent. What makes this model different from the other two is its consideration of the existence of multiple relations between reading and writing and of the possibility that the nature of reading-writing relationship might change with development.

In his research study among second and fifth graders, it was found that reading and writing were significantly related for both groups [28]. The study reported that as students become more proficient, the nature of reading-writing relationship changes leading to a conclusion that what is learned at one stage of development can be qualitatively different from what is learned at another stage. Such conclusion suggests that at any given point of development, reading and writing consist of both dependent and independent abilities.

In another study, it was found that the interactive aspect of the bidirectional model better fits their data at the fifth than at the second grade level. They reported that since more reading instruction was given to the subjects, the effect of writing on reading decreased in the upper grades. Finally, they declared that the reading-to-writing model is superior to the writing-to-reading model. This means that more information from reading is used in writing than vice-versa [29].

These documented studies provide direct evidence for the bidirectional model. As indicated by these researches, this model claims that the reading-writing relationship can be qualitatively different at different stages of development. What these differences are, Eisterhold points out, remain at this point unspecified.

In summary, each of these models offers a different focus for the reading-writing relationship. The directional model focuses on the role of input in the development of reading and writing skills. The nondirectional model focuses on the common underlying cognitive processes involved in reading and writing. The bidirectional model focuses on the multiple relations and interrelated processes that seem to constitute the reading-writing relationship. Nevertheless, these three different hypotheses are made related by their common denominator that is explicit instruction - the key factor in facilitating transfer of skills across modalities.

In this study, the focus of the directional model that is input and the focus of the nondirectional model - the common underlying cognitive processes - have been considered in the formulation of conceptual framework. This study investigate further if the role of explicit instruction in facilitating transfer of skills holds true with the transference of students' discourse skills from reading to writing.

### C. Discourse Approach and Transfer of Skills

Underlying any discourse-centered approach to language teaching is the theory that views language as discourse. The functions of language are best understood in a discourse

environment. They have described that a discourse-based view of language involves examining how bits of language contribute to the making of complete texts and exploring the relationship between the linguistic patterns of complete texts and the social contexts in which they function [30]. Language is a discourse using sentences which is the use of sentences to perform acts of communication which cohere into larger communicative units, ultimately establishing a rhetorical pattern which characterize the piece of language as a whole as a kind of communication [31.] Sharing the same schema, discourse may also be defined as the coherent, dynamic communicative function of a text whereby looking at a text as discourse is to look at the way in which its various elements function in relation to one another to communicate patterns of integrated meaning [32].

Researchers have presented several macro-discourse structures which can serve as models for analyzing written expository texts. Among these macro-structures, the Problem-Solution and Topic-Restriction-Illustration structures have been found as the commonest and most studied macro-discourse patterns. It is believed that these two discourse structures are deemed to enhance learners' writing ability since they are universal and fundamental structures in written composition [32], [33].

A particular macro-pattern is typical of a particular type of discourse when the occurrence of a certain number of its discourse elements in a certain order is common in that type of discourse. Thus, the macro-pattern S-P-Sn-Ev ( Situation-Problem-Solution-Evaluation ) is typical of many varieties of scientific discourse (and also of many other varieties of discourse) in that the occurrence of these elements in that order is common. It should be noted however that the two elements - *Problem* and *Solution* - act as the core elements in this pattern in that they are central to the assignment of a text to a specific discourse. Their presence or absence is definitional in the assignment of a specific text to the P-Sn discourse type [32].

## II. METHOD

### A. The Venue and Subjects of the Study

This study was conducted at the school where the researcher used to teach. Two groups of subjects were involved in this study. The first group consisted of 30 students who received the treatment (a class in which the discourse approach was employed). It was one of the 15 sections of third year high school classes.

The second group that also consisted of 30 students and also one of the third year high school classes underwent the traditional approach. The subjects were third year high school students whose ages ranged from 14 to 16 years old. Both groups were cluster samples of third year high school morning classes.

*B. The Instruments*

The researcher employed three types of tests determined by the purpose for which they were to be administered. These purposes were: 1) to know the subjects' level of language proficiency, 2) to determine the subjects' current writing competence level, and 3) to assess the extent of transfer of skills.

*C. Treatment*

While the control group was taught the traditional approach to reading using the traditional dimensional approach, the experimental group was exposed to a discourse approach to reading utilizing Crombie's model of discoursed analysis. Nonetheless, both groups were given the same reading texts and the same topics given in the pretests were also given for the posttests to see if the experiment exhibited significant gains.

III. RESULTS

*Effect of the Discourse Approach on the Academic Writing*

The main objective of the researcher-prepared test was to determine the effect of explicit instruction of discourse structures (discourse approach to reading) on the academic writing of the subjects of the study. The main statistical measure used to compare the means of the two groups of subjects on the use of discourse macro--patterns was the correlated t-test of significance. In measuring the difference between the means of the two groups regarding the use of discourse signals, one-way ANCOVA was employed since the groups' pretests means were significantly different, in favor of the control group.

It was reported that the experimental group (72.00) had a slightly higher mean score in pretest set 1 than the control group (70.67) on the use of the PSn discourse macro-pattern. However, the difference between the mean scores was not significant. In pretest set 2, the mean scores of the same groups, (82.00) for the experimental (81.00) for the control group, are again not significantly different. The statistical results then show that the two groups were initially on the same level. However, in examining the difference between the means in the posttests of the two groups, it was found out that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group. In posttest set 1, the experimental group mean (96.00) was statistically higher than the mean of the control group (72.67). Likewise, in posttest set 2, the experimental group had a substantially higher mean score (95.00) than the control group (84.50). In the two posttests, the differences between the mean scores of the two groups were highly significant (p<0.001). These findings then support the hypothesis that explicit instruction of discourse structures (discourse approach to reading) exhibits significant effect on learners' academic writing specifically on the use of discourse macro-patterns.

TABLE I  
T-TESTS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS OF THE CONTROL AND THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS ON THE USE OF DISCOURSE MACRO-PATTERNS

Set	Group	Mean	SD	Diff. Bet. Means	t-ratio	Prob.
Pretest	Exp	72.00	6.64	1.33	0.94	NS
	Con	70.67	3.65			
Posttest	Exp	96.00	9.32	23.33	11.37	***
	Con	72.67	6.91			
Gain	Exp	24.00	10.69	22.00	10.70	***
	Con	2.00	8.05			
Set 2	Group	Mean	SD	Diff. Bet. Means	t-ratio	Prob.
Pretest	Exp	82.00	13.87	1.00	0.27	NS
	Con	81.00	12.41			
Posttest	Exp	95.00	10.67	10.50	3.43	***
	Con	84.50	13.35			
Gain	Exp	13.00	14.59	9.50	2.43	*
	Con	3.50	17.02			

NC = 30, NE = 30

Legend:

- \* significant at the .05 level
- \*\* significant at the .01 level
- \*\*\* significant at the .001 level
- NS not significant

In addition, the table reveals that the mean gain scores of the experimental group (24.00) are substantially higher than the control group (2.00). The difference between the mean gain scores of the two groups in the first set of tests (pretest set 1 to posttest set 1) was highly significant ( p<0.001 ).

Likewise, in the second set of tests (pretest set 2 to posttest set 2), the experimental group's mean gain score (13.00) is significantly different from the control group's gain ( 3.50 ) at 0.05 level of significance.

TABLE II  
SUMMARY OF ONE-WAY ANCOVA ON THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS' USE OF DISCOURSE SIGNALS

Set 1			
Computed Means			
Group	N	Observed Means	Adjusted Means
Experimental	30	17.23	17.60
Control	30	13.80	13.43
Total	60	15.52	15.52

Again, these findings support the hypothesis that learners who received the discourse approach to reading would exhibit better performance than those who were trained under the non-discourse approach on the use of macro-discourse patterns in their academic writing.

Summary

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Adjusted Means	234.45	1	234.45	9.78	**
Adjusted Error			1366.03	57	23.97
Adjusted Total				1600.48	58

Set 2  
Computed Means

Group	N	Observed Means	Adjusted Means
Experimental	30	13.90	14.48
Control	30	10.17	9.59
Total	60	12.03	12.03

Summary

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Adjusted Means	286.82	1	286.82	14.04	***
	Adjusted Error		1164.61	57	20.43
	Adjusted Total			1451.44	58

Legend:

- \* significant at the .05 level
- \*\* significant at the .01 level
- \*\*\* significant at the .001 level

It was reported that the experimental group consistently outperformed the control group in the two posttests regarding the use of discourse signals. In posttest set 1, the experimental group gained a higher adjusted mean ( 17.60 ) than the control group ( 13.43 ). Likewise, in posttest set 2, the experimental group gained a higher adjusted mean ( 14.48 ) than the control group ( 9.56 ). And as could be seen in the table, the differences in the mean scores of these groups on their use of discourse signals were statistically significant at 0.01 and 0.001 levels of significance. This indicates then that at the level of using discourse signals, discourse approach to reading also exhibits significant effect upon the learners’ academic writing performance. It was pointed out that the subjects under the experimental group performed significantly much better than the control group subjects in transferring their discourse skills from the reading mode to the mode of writing.

In summary, the findings here revealed that the learners of the experimental group showed high sensitivity to discourse structures as a result of explicit instruction of these structures. This was manifested by their writing compositions that exhibited the different discourse macro-patterns explicitly taught to them. Thus, the experimental group learners, unlike the control group learners, were found to be successful in transferring their discourse skills from reading to writing. These findings of the study affirm Hiebert, Englert, and Brennan’s [10] conclusion that knowledge of text structure apparently enhanced performance by guiding the writer in generating sentences congruent with the given topics and text structures. Finally, such idea is consistent with Fine’s analysis that the psychological steps or processes involved in producing and comprehending discourse are related to the patterning of the discourse [34].

IV. CONCLUSION

The discourse approach to reading ( explicit instruction of discourse structures ) facilitates transfer of discourse skills from reading to writing. ESL learners who are explicitly taught with discourse patterns or structures in reading

deliberately apply their knowledge and skills of discourse in their writing tasks. As a manifestation of transfer of discourse skills, significant improvements in the academic writing are evident at three levels of discourse: discourse macro-patterns, discourse micro-patterns, and discourse signals. Since reading and writing share a common base of knowledge and skills, ESL learners must be provided with linked activities of reading and writing in order to capitalize on the strong relationship between these two modes of communication. Language teachers should capitalize on the idea of skill-transfer, benefit from it, and help their learners attain the same benefits. They should explicitly teach the discourse structures and patterns found in the reading materials their learners read and should provide them with ample writing activities for them to make use of their knowledge and skills of discourse. In doing so, the learners are trained on how to approach their reading and writing tasks as discourse comprehension and production.

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