

MOVING FROM PROMPT-BASED WRITING INSTRUCTION TO READING-TO-WRITE INSTRUCTION IN ESL

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Impromptu writing prompts are defined as open-ended questions of relatively modest length, characterized by decontextualized statements or questions to which respondents are expected to demonstrate their writing ability (Elliot, 2005). This type of prompt is pervasive across genres (e.g., persuasive, argumentative, cause and effect, academic), providing a common method to initiate writing and to teach essay-writing techniques. In learning to write in a second language, however, writing pedagogy based on decontextualized prompts is woefully inadequate; the point of departure for L2 writing should be situated in reading—i.e., a source text that allows the learner to mimic the linguistic elements of the written input in a process known as language style matching (LSM) (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010). Without input from the text, learning to write is impossible, and much of second language acquisition (SLA) theories in general involve trying to explain how input leads to acquisition by some specified cognitive processes (Gass, 1997). Far too many ESL writing curricula rely on decontextualized prompts to goad learners to create meaning (Pfinstang & O'Hara, 1998). According to Ewert (2011), "it is surprising how many ESL courses for matriculated second-language learners still focus on discrete and sometimes decontextualized reading and writing skills" (p. 6). The problem, he notes, is that in the case of second language writing development, a focus on explicit writing techniques based on decontextualized texts leads to disfluent writing behaviors (Ewert, 2011). Instead, a carefully selected reading passage should serve as the prompt, integrating reading and writing in response and serving as the most natural means of providing the written input necessary for teaching second language writers.

Decontextualized writing prompts come in different types, lengths, and purposes, but because of their inherent conciseness, they typically either make broad statements or describe situations without providing much nuance or context. To illustrate, consider a typical "do you agree or disagree with the following statement" type taken from the TOEFL independent writing: *television advertising directed toward young children (aged two to five) should not be allowed*.¹ This one-sentence prompt has 14 words, yet the response is generally expected to be about 300 words, organized into four or five paragraphs supported by well-argued rationales with plenty of illustrations and examples. Prompts such as this appear to be decontextualized in order to elicit varying responses by putting the burden on the writer to create context by specifying, for example, what kind of advertising or to what degree one should define "not be allowed" as part of their reasoning. The problem with this approach is that other than as a means for assessing writing ability in a standardized testing environment, prompt-based writing lacks ecological validity both

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inside and outside the classroom. One hardly ever writes in the absence of context or responds so disproportionately in turn. As Perelman (2012) observes:

A boss does not send an email to a subordinate stating, "Failure is necessary for success." Send me a well-organized response to this statement in 25 minutes. People do not write on general topics on demand to no one (p. 123).

In addition, of course, in today's "post-process"² era of L2 writing, instructors should be focused more on the social and interactional aspect of writing—i.e., reading and then responding to the author (Javadi-Safa, 2018; Kalan, 2014).

From an SLA perspective, learners are badly in need of linguistic input as a source of learning. In the longstanding tradition of SLA research, it is commonly understood that any language learning requires the availability of the sample target language in some form for the learner to process and internalize. In the case of ESL writers, the need for written input is even greater. This is because reading and writing are inseparable, as one naturally feeds and nurtures the other. It is hardly surprising that the best writers also happen to be avid readers (Schoonen, 2019). A well-read writer is exposed to a greater range of vocabulary, styles, voices, and genres of writing at the macro level and formulaic collocations of words, phrases, or grammatical structures at the sentential level. As a result, individuals often unknowingly mimic other great authors in their writing as their writing ability develops (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010). In some sense we all "borrow" language taken from our exposure to the samples that are around us. As writing teachers, we want our students to adopt and adapt from samples of great writing and make them part of their repertoires in constructing their essays. One immediate way to encourage this is to provide sample essays for students to read, but a better method may be to have them write in response to a model passage. Studies have shown that students tend to synchronize their writing to match the structure of a text they have recently read, regardless of their affiliation or opposition to the views stated—i.e., language style matching (LSM), a writer's relative use of function word categories such as articles, determiners (i.e., nouns), prepositions, and pronouns after reading a text, shows evidence of mimicry (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010). LSM affords writers the opportunity to intentionally or unintentionally mimic the stylistic features of the original author through uses of function words. It is a bottom-up approach in which the writers soak in the written input and utilize it in their writing without necessarily being aware of their intentions to do so. In contrast, prompt-based pedagogy focuses on explicit teaching of techniques that characterize good writing as rubrics of content, organization, and language. Deliberately putting those techniques into practice is a struggle for second language writers because this kind of pedagogy is heavily top down, teacher centered, and technique driven (East, 2017).

One reason prompt-based pedagogy has been so dominant is the inescapable nature of testing that surrounds our students. TOEFL, MET, IELTS, TOEIC, GRE, GMAT, for example, as well as institutional proficiency placement and exit tests, all feature versions of decontextualized prompt writing as part of proficiency tests. There are even ESL writing classes whose sole purpose is to prepare students to pass a prompt-based exit writing test. In this regard, it is important to note that writing prompts were originally developed for their psychometric property of reliability in standardized testing, and were not necessarily pedagogically motivated (Elliot, 2005). Reading was considered a distinct and separate construct, one not to be confounded with writing ability; consequently, writing prompts had to be devoid of long passages in order to separate the two constructs for the sake of test validity (Weigle, 2002). In light of these circumstances, the practice of teaching writing from a prompt may well be the mission of "teaching to the test" that promotes formulaic writing with techniques that promise points on the test. This clearly does not reflect the best teaching method when one considers how reading and writing are inseparably represented in reality yet separately measured in tests. Crusan (2010) argues that because the kind of writing required on standardized testing is limited, it will reinforce the teaching of unreflective and *formulaic* [emphasis supplied] writing (four- or five-paragraph essays) in our writing students. Given the

incongruence between how we teach (via writing-in-vacuum) versus the reality (reading-to-write), it's high time that educators reevaluate the effectiveness of prompt-based writing instruction and consider alternatives that pair writing with appropriate reading as the best method of teaching L2 writing.

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Notes

¹Similarly worded prompts are commonly found in ESL writing textbooks.

²Reviewing key issues in L2 writing, Javadi-Safa (2018) argues that the current state of L2 writing pedagogy has moved on from “process-oriented” to “post-process” (p. 15), in which writing is a collaborative and social act rather than a codified technique (see also Kalan, 2014).

