



## A Case Study of Two College Students' Reading Strategies and Their Writing Styles

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### ABSTRACT

The importance of integrating reading and writing has aroused many people's interest, and how to bridge the gap between input (reading) and output (writing) is regarded as an urgent necessity. However, input does not equal to intake, and to achieve the stage of intake, the reader's conscious attention to the input is necessary, which is commonly realized in the reading process, either by intensive reading (focus-on-form) or extensive reading (focus-on-meaning). Previous studies put more emphasis on extensive reading, while this study is based on the assumed different effects of reading strategies upon writing styles, that is, intensive reading may guarantee accurate writing and extensive reading may promote fluent writing. Therefore the relationship between two college students' reading strategies and writing styles is the focus of this study. The research lasts for 16 months (August, 2014 - December, 2015), during which all their journal writing pieces, their term papers, together with their compositions in the final exams, are used as the written data, while materials concerned with their reading strategies are collected by a questionnaire, two interviews, as well as their written self-reflections. Results show that extensive reading with a subconscious focus-on-meaning tends to enhance the fluency of writing while intensive reading with a conscious focus-on-form is more likely to promote the writing accuracy. Findings suggest that production is based on intake, which is the result of either the subconscious or conscious attention to both the language meaning and language form.

**Keywords:** Accuracy, focus-on-form, focus-on-meaning, fluency.

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### 1.0 Introduction

The close relationship between reading and writing and hence the importance of combining reading

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and writing has been emphasized and frequently discussed (Berninger, 2002; He, 2013; Zhang & Yang, 2010). Reading and writing are even regarded as equivalents in the sense that reading is "really writing" (actively creating meaning), and writing is "really reading" (passively finding what culture and history have inscribed in our heads), and weakness in reading often stems from neglect of writing (Elbow, 2004), and a large amount of reading can improve student writers' fluency and accuracy in writing (Ji, 2009; Wang, 2015). This is because source texts benefits writing in either knowledge telling or knowledge transforming (Cumming, 2013; Hirvela & Du, 2013).

The importance of the integration of reading and writing cannot be more revealed in its cultivation for critical thinking (Cavdar & Doe, 2012; Gao, 2013; Yang, 2010; Zhang, 2009a), for it is generally agreed that reading widely can improve the learners' writing abilities, and in the process of writing, the logical thinking abilities will be enhanced. Critical thinking abilities include the abilities to organize "structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning" (Weissberg, 2013) or the abilities to find out the problems and then to provide the solutions (Saxton et al, 2012). All the values and competencies of critical thinking are socially constructed and highly situated within different disciplines (Condon & Kelly-Riley, 2004), and meaning construction, the link between reading and writing, is the result of critical thinking (Gebhard et al, 2013).

The integration of reading into writing can find its application in either the language tests or the reading and writing classes. Reading-to-write, a term taken from language testing studies, in contrast to writing-only, proves to be one of the options (Plakans, 2008; Plakans & Gebril, 2012, 2013). The basic procedure of this model is that the students first read some materials of the target language, then find out the significant points, and finally state their opinions in the writing form from one perspective (Zhang, 2009b). This model can be best used in the intensive reading class (Li, 2014). By analyzing the students' writing pieces after reading and their written introspections on their own writing processes, Li (2015) finds that journal writing helps the university students gain a better understanding of the source text, gives them a chance to review the text, cultivates their critical thinking abilities, and guarantees them a special opportunity to communicate with the teacher. Besides Reading-to-write, continuation task (writing the ending of the reading material) also proves to be an effective way (Wang, 2012). These methods are collectively called the task-based writing, which are efficient ways in improving the fluency of students' writing (Zhou & Siriyothin, 2010). All in all, how to bridge the gap between input (reading) and output (writing) is regarded as an urgent necessity (Li, 2013), and a LSA-driven EFL writing pedagogical experiment, which aims to encourage the students to read English novels and then write something critically, is one of those experimental researches (He, 2013).

However, the integration of reading and writing is not only a language activity, but also a complex mental process, in which various factors are involved. From reading to writing, the reader/writer goes at least the following mental processes: (Reading) decoding—understanding—restoring—stimulating—recoding—producing (Writing) (Li, 2012). In every stage, the knowledge of language at different levels (sounds, spelling, meaning, grammar, pragmatic knowledge) would play a crucial role. Reading itself is not adequate for writing well, but understanding of the reading material and restoration of the knowledge and the further activation of the restored information is much more important. In other words, input does not equal to intake, and to achieve the stage of intake, the reader's conscious attention to the input is necessary (Truscott & Smith, 2011). Therefore different reading strategies need to be proposed to help language learners to activate their comprehension of the reading materials so as to produce successful writing pieces.

Generally speaking, those various reading strategies are covered by two approaches, intensive reading (focus-on-form) and extensive reading (focus-on-meaning). Classroom researches show that the extensive reading approach was as good as, or better than, the more focused intensive reading because extensive reading facilitates reading comprehension ability, reading speed, vocabulary acquisition, and positive attitudes towards reading (Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009), and extensive reading provides gains in affect, linguistic competence and it may lead to gains in vocabulary and

spelling (Day & Bamford, 1998). The importance of extensive reading is emphasized here, but its difference from intensive reading and their respective effects upon writing are not further discussed. However, teaching English as a foreign language in China for so many years, we not only witnessed a lot of unsuccessful language learners but also saw the strong differences between the comparatively good language learners, for example, some are fluent in both speaking and writing, while others are slow but accurate in both the activities. Whether this is not only because of their personality but also because of their reading strategies inspires me to investigate the effects of the adopted reading approaches upon the writing activities. In the present paper, the following questions will be answered: Is there a relationship between the students' reading strategies and their writing styles? Does intensive reading guarantee accurate writing and extensive reading promote fluent writing?

## 2.0 Method

### 2.1 Participants

Two of the participants in the previous study (Li, 2015) are the subjects of this research. The research lasts for 16 months (August, 2014 - December, 2015). I am their course instructor, first as the instructor of *Advanced English* (August, 2014- July, 2015) and secondly as the instructor of *Research Methodology and Academic Writing* (August 2015 – December 2015). In each semester of the whole academic year (August, 2014- July, 2015), all the 16 students in the same class are supposed to write journals based on their reading materials. During the whole process, the students' journals are collected, peer-reviewed, and then teacher-reviewed. At the end of the academic year, two students (Cathy and Sophia) in the class are chosen as the participants for the present research. This is based on their fresh ideas and their different writing styles: Cathy treats journal as essay writing, while Sophia regards it as diary; Cathy writes with carefully chosen words and structures, while Sophia's words follow her feelings smoothly. Either style attracts me greatly.

The following table provides the basic information of the two participants, which is concerned with their performance in TEM 4 and their Rank in the grade in the first three academic years (August, 2012-July, 2015).

	Sex	TEM-4 score	Rank in the grade
Cathy	Female	B	Top Five
Sophia	Female	A	Top Three

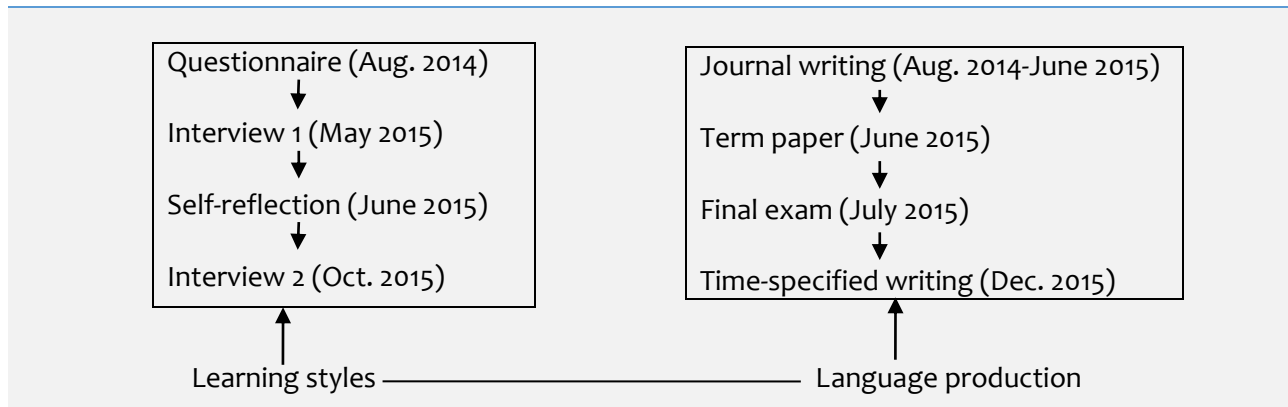
TEM-4 was taken almost at the end of their sophomore year (April, 2013), which is an English proficiency test, regarded as one of the two important tests for the English majors in China (Another language proficiency test, TEM-8, will be given to them in April, 2016). Sophia is the only one in the grade who got an A in the TEM-4. Cathy narrowly missed A. Since neither of them has the desire to go abroad to make further study, they didn't take TOFEL or GRE. Because of their excellent performances in every subject in the previous three years in our university, they were both given the opportunity to take a special exam as a "recommended exemption graduate" (see note). Sophia was recommended to Shanghai International Studies University, and Cathy, University of International Business and Economics. In October, 2015, they were both admitted as a graduate student by their respective recommended university. In a word, they are comparatively good language learners and their language proficiency is at a higher level.

### 2.2 Data collection

Besides the questionnaire for the whole class at the beginning of the first semester, one informal interview is made in May, 2015, and another in October, 2015, to further elicit their individual learning styles, especially in reading. Furthermore, in June, 2015, they are encouraged to write a self-reflection of

their own English learning style. Finally, their performances in the academic year for the course *Advanced English* and their time-specified writing pieces for the course *Research Methodology and Academic Writing* are also collected as the data for analysis.

The features of language production (writing) can reveal the nature of the language learners' learning. With a purpose of studying the interrelationship between language learning styles in reading and language production in writing, their language data and their language learning strategies are collected, which is shown in the following table.



The questionnaire is designed to elicit the basic information of the participants. Interview 1 is mainly concerned with the two participants' learning style, which is further elaborated in their written self-reflection. Interview 2 is conducted when the two participants successfully finished their "recommended exemption graduate" examination to give them a chance to think aloud of their own learning.

### 2.3 Data analysis

Through the 16-month data collection, the two participants' journal writing pieces, their term paper, and their final exam paper in the academic year for the course *Advanced English*, and their time-specified writing at the end of December, 2015 for the course *Research Methodology and Academic Writing*, are used as the data for a qualitative analysis. The journal writing pieces are mainly peer-reviewed in class and later reviewed by the researcher. However, their term paper, final exam, and their time-specified writing are made comments and given scores by another teacher. The questionnaire, their self-reflections, the two interview results would be the supplementary materials for analysis.

#### 2.3.1 Analysis of their journal writing and term paper

Their journal writing pieces and their term paper in the whole academic year are put together for an analysis, because they share one feature of free writing: No genre requirement; No topic restriction; No time restriction. The only difference lies between them is "the term paper is expected to be written with no less than 2000 English words". Comparison between the two participants' free writing shows that they have their own specific characteristics.

**Table 2:** Characteristics of their free writing

Name	Journal Writing	Term Paper
Cathy	In her journals all the words are carefully chosen and the structures are clear cut. Her journals are usually short, precise, and full of philosophical ideas.	Title: Reflections on "Who am I" This is a clear structured paper, in which several definitions are distinguished. It is sort of a philosophical paper.
Sophia	It seems that Sophia always has a lot of things to write. She writes in smooth English. Her journals	No title Just like her journal writing, this paper is

include a lot of thoughts, such as her daily thinking, free in both the ideas and style. It is kind book report, background introduction of the texts, of a novel. The reader can feel the stream as well as the comments on some events. It is not of consciousness. difficult for her to choose a topic.

### 2.3.2 Analysis of their final examination

The final examination includes different testing types, such as vocabulary, paraphrase, figure of speech, translation, reading and writing. Here only three items are used for analysis. The examination results show that there is a significant difference between their vocabulary while small difference between their reading and writing. Cathy's score (90) is higher than Sophia's (82) mainly because Cathy did much better in Vocabulary (Multiple Choice), which requires the examinee's accurateness in learning the new words. From the result, we can see that in Reading Comprehension (Multiple Choice) Sophia did excellent, while Cathy made one wrong choice. In writing Cathy's essay is given 14 marks (total score is 15) while Sophia's essay is given 12 marks. This can be seen in the following comparison:

	Vocabulary	Reading comprehension	Writing
Total	20	20	15
Cathy	20	18	14
Sophia	14	20	12

### 2.3.3 Analysis of their time-specified writing

Compared with their free journal writing and term paper, the writing task which is part of their final examination for the course *Research Methodology and Academic Writing*, is more formal. It has two sections. The direction of the first section is "Among the following writing procedures, which is the most difficult one to you"? This requires them to reflect their writing experience in the whole semester upon the following writing tasks:

- a. Choosing the topic;
- b. Working out a bibliography;
- c. Writing the outline; and
- d. Writing the thesis proposal

The second section asks them to read one published English paper (the original abstract is omitted) in a foreign journal and then write an English abstract with 100 words.

They are given altogether 2 hours for the two writing tasks. Sophia handed in her writing half an hour earlier than the given time, while Cathy stayed in the classroom until the last minute. They both accidentally chose "writing the outline" as their first writing task. Their pieces of writing in this task are restricted, specified, and formal. The following comments are given by my colleague, another teacher in my department.

Cathy	Sophia
1. The obvious feature of her writing is Chinglish.	1. Her writing is free and smooth.
2. She has not a good command of English grammar, such as the incorrect use of the English "article".	2. She has a flexible way of using words and sentence structures.
3. She knows how to arrange the ideas in that she uses the words like "first", "second".	3. The piece of writing expresses her thoughts accurately
4. However, her writing is not smooth.	4. Preferring long sentences, she cares less of grammar occasionally.

According to my colleague's opinion, Sophia is better in writing than Cathy. Cathy's only merit in her writing is the clear structure, while Sophia has a flexible way of choosing words so that her writing is free and smooth. This corresponds to my impressions on their journal writings. Therefore the two participants have their own specific language production (writing) styles. No matter what type of writing is required, Cathy is restricted in structure and ideas and careful in word choice, while Sophia is smooth in structure and thoughts and flexible in word choice. This may be explained by their respective reading styles, the co-relations between their reading strategies and writing styles will be shown in the following table.

	Writing style	Reading preference	While-reading activity	After-reading activity
Cathy	Short sentences, well-arranged ideas, accurate choice of words	Short philosophical essays	Taking notes	Memorizing some sentences which would be used in writing
Sophia	Long sentences, smooth, fluent	Original English novels	Reading aloud; thinking deeply	Writing freely

### 3.0 Findings and discussions

Though both of them agree that reading and writing go hand in hand, reading and writing go before the fulfillment of language learning, and reading and writing are imperative for language learners, their perceptions of the interrelationship between reading and writing are different. According to Cathy, writing is "a process in which you explore your own ideas", and it is "a way for you to find yourself", and Sophia thinks "writing journal makes me fond of searching for information... I can say that journal drives me to read".

Both Cathy and Sophia are regarded as good language learners, however, analyses of the data show that they possess different features in free writing, vocabulary learning, and time-specified writing, which correspond to their different reading styles. Cathy is good at writing short, precise philosophical essays, while Sophia prefers writing long, smooth stories; Cathy prefers accurate words and short clear structures, while Sophia loves to make choices among words and does not avoid the complex sentence structures. The correlations between their reading and writing seem to suggest that reading influences writing in a lot of aspects, which may be summarized as the following.

#### 3.1 Extensive reading and fluent writing

Sophia was free in her journal writing, her term paper, and even in her time-specified writing. The hidden reasons can be detected in her written self-reflection.

When I write something, I care less or even no attention of my handwriting, grammar or spelling, but I care more about my thoughts and emotions that I am going to convey.

...For me, intensive reading means extensive reading, and extensive reading equals cursory reading. This is good and this is harmful. It's good to read quickly and get the overall plot. It's harmful because the inner charm of words, sentences, and rhetorics are neglected. This accounts for my instant understanding of the texts, while cumbersome grasp of the usage of words...I discovered that a major portion of my time goes to quick reading, which gives me a silver icy and snowy world, yet I could not appreciate even a single snow dancing in the air.

Sophia mentions that she acquires vocabulary by reading extensively and she never consciously memorizes the new words. This leads to the result that she can identify a lot of words in reading while

in writing sometimes she couldn't spell the words correctly. Even before the TEM-4, she still keeps reading novels. From her self-reflection, we can see that in her extensive reading Sophia focuses more on meaning and sometimes she even ignores the form to get a quick glimpse of the main idea of a novel. This proves to be a hindrance of her vocabulary acquisition, in that she is not accurate in making multiple choices in the vocabulary tests. On the other hand, if fast reading and focusing-on-meaning guarantee her smooth and fluent writing, less care of the form sometimes results in her casual style and not-clear-cut structure.

### 3.2 Intensive reading and careful writing

As Hanaoka (2007) puts it, spontaneous attention to form in a four-stage writing task enhances learning. Cathy belongs to this type of language learners. She pays much more attention to form, careful and slow in both her reading and her writing. Cathy prefers reading short stories and then memorizing the beautiful words and phrases and even the sentences, so whenever she wants to write something, the collection of those words or expressions in her mind would appear on the paper. This may also explain why Cathy did better in vocabulary test in the final examination. However, she is frustrated by her own learning style, which is shown in her self-reflection:

I pay too much attention to the sentence structure. Sometimes, I may stop halfway and rearrange some sentences, which may interrupt my following thinking.

Without extensive reading in various fields, Cathy's writing seems to follow some fixed rules. Her thoughts are expressed by the clear-cut structure and the carefully-chosen words, but her language sounds unnatural. Just as she herself realizes, fast reading and extensive reading are the prerequisites of a piece of good writing.

## 4.0 Conclusion

From what has been discussed, we can see that between reading and writing, language learners' conscious or subconscious attention to both the form and meaning of the language guarantees the successful transition from input to intake. Without it, language acquisition is impossible. Extensive reading and intensive reading are the two necessities in language learning, and focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning are two indispensable approaches adopted by good language learners, especially in reading and writing.

The significant difference between Cathy and Sophia is that the former reads selectively while the latter reads voraciously. Both of them have realized the importance of combining extensive reading with intensive reading. It's the ultimate way to learn English more thoroughly through the combination of extensive and intensive reading. Therefore it is safe to draw the conclusion that focus-on-form and focus-on-meaning are two aspects of learning a language. Neglect of either one would damage the result of language learning.

There is a correlation between fluency with focus-on-meaning and accuracy with focus-on-form. Focus-on-meaning in reading is possibly to enhance reading speed and enrich the ideas and consequently it would result in fluent and smooth writing, while focus-on-form in reading is more likely to achieve a slow reading speed and a clear master of the structure, and finally a short and accurate piece of writing. There is no doubt of combining the two approaches in our reading to achieve both fluency and accuracy in our writing. Neglect of either approach would result in a less satisfying end. The implication of this research upon second language acquisition is that production is based on intake, which is the result of either the subconscious or conscious attention to both the language meaning and language form. As grown-up language learners, conscious attention to the form after meaning is quite necessary.

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Note: In China, every year there is one formal Graduate Entrance Examination before the Spring Festival (at the end of January or the beginning of February). However, before that there is an opportunity for the “recommended exemption graduates”, which is given to the top 5 percent excellent undergraduate students every year in September. In each university the candidates are chosen according to their GPA in the previous three academic years as well as some other standards. Some of them would continue their study in their own university, and some others would choose any other university. Completing the enrolling process and having been given the chance, they are usually given a special examination by the chosen university in October. If they pass the examination, they would be given a “conditional offer” in early November, on condition that their graduation thesis must be above “B”.