

# Exploring Reading & Writing Relationships in Grade Five

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**Abstract-** *The study investigated the relationship between reading and writing with Grade Five learners. The objective of the study was to investigate whether extensive reading and practice in writing enhance learners' reading and writing skills. The sample for the study consisted of eighty Grade Five learners at a school in an informal settlement in Windhoek. The methods used were questionnaire and case study surveys, and a quasi-experiment. A questionnaire survey and a pre-test administered to both groups were followed by intervention. Qualitative data were gathered means of a case study, while quantitative data were gathered by means of the pre-rest post-test experiment. Analysis of the post-test results indicated that the sessions of pleasure reading and practice in writing improved reading and writing scores for the experimental group. Also, the survey data gained from the experimental group indicated an increase in enjoyment of, interest in, and a positive attitude towards reading.*

**Keywords-** *Reading-Writing Relationships; Extensive Reading; Writing Practice*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The poor reading skills among learners and students seem to have an adverse effect on their writing and therefore on their academic results in general. The following questions prompted this research project: What is the origin of learners' problems in terms of reading and writing? What exactly is the relationship between reading and writing development? What can be done to enhance learners' reading and writing skills? Should learners be encouraged to indulge in pleasure reading more to improve their reading skills and will opportunities for practice in free writing enhance their writing skills? This research project is therefore aimed at providing learners with access to, and opportunities for extensive reading and a lot of practice in writing, with an understanding that it might improve their reading and writing skills that will lead to better results. The objective of the study was to investigate whether extensive reading and practice in writing enhance learners' reading and writing skills.

Concerns about the quality of education in Namibian schools have been expressed in several sources, i.e. Vision 2030, ETSIP (2007), NQF, Ministry of Education: Namibia Qualifications Authority (2006), among others, (Wikan, Mostert, Danbolt, Nes, Nyathi and Hengari, 2007) [32]. Concerns have been expressed regarding the unsatisfactory levels of performance of learners in Namibian schools, with specific reference to less than satisfactory achievement in reading and writing (Wikan et al, 2007) [32]. Our concern about the multitude of problems that university students experience resulted in discussions with primary and secondary school teachers, who confirmed that poor reading and writing skills are also a major problem among their learners. Pretorius (2002)

[23], who is an expert in the field of reading, and working in the Applied Linguistics Department at UNISA concurs that the problem has to be investigated at a much earlier stage, already in the primary school phase (telephonic conversation). Therefore we decided to conduct a small scale research with Grade five learners at one primary school in Windhoek Education Region to investigate the relationship between reading and writing in order to establish how attention to reading and writing can improve learners' reading and writing skills.

### 1.1 The factors that contribute to poor reading ability and unsatisfactory writing performance

Many learners are from marginalized groups and disadvantaged schools in rural and urban areas, where they are taught by teachers who lack the qualifications and skills to teach content area subjects through the medium of English. At UNAM both lecturers and students argue that students' achievement in tests, assignments and examinations are negatively affected by academically disadvantaged backgrounds which are linked to their language backgrounds. The teachers who taught English as a subject to primary and secondary learners also had severe problems because of their poor command in English (Otaala, 2005) [22]. The reason for teachers' inadequacy was that after Namibia's independence in 1990, English became the official language of the country as well as medium of instruction in schools. This implementation of English as the language of instruction resulted in major problems for teachers and learners. Particularly rural teachers faced and still face situations where they and their learners have limited contact with, and exposure to English, thus making the situation not conducive to

teaching and learning English, or content subjects through English as medium (MBEC, 2000). Wikan et al's (2007) [32] findings indicate that Namibian teachers in certain regions have very low skills compared to teachers in most of the neighbouring countries, and concluded that the low quality of teacher education and lack of qualified teachers might have contributed to the poor performance of learners (p.11). Another reason for poor literacy skills discussed by Wikan et al (2007) [32] is that learners from poor and illiterate parents have more trouble in developing reading and writing skills than learners who come from more privileged backgrounds. The learners involved in our research are from a primary school located in an informal settlement in Windhoek, who face problems similar to the ones mentioned by these writers.

### 1.2 Attention to reading improves reading

It is thought that poor performance in reading and writing leads to unsatisfactory results in examinations and even causes failure. Pretorius (2002) [23] questions the assumptions that poor reading abilities are the result of poor proficiency in the language of instruction (in our case English), and that poor proficiency in the language of instruction results in poor academic performance. She argues that improved language proficiency does not necessarily lead to satisfactory reading skills. However, "attention to reading improves reading and in this process language proficiency also improves" (Pretorius, 2002, p.175) [23]. Therefore, it can be assumed that improved reading ability will also lead to increased academic success.

### 1.3 The connection between reading ability and writing performance

Numerous writers have reported on the connection between reading ability and writing performance. Eisterholdt (1996) [7] states that traditionally, reading in the writing classroom is regarded as the appropriate input for acquiring writing skills, because it is assumed that reading passages will be used as models for writing. Furthermore, reading-writing connection can be compared with Krashen's theories of L2 acquisition. Krashen (1984, cited in Eisterholdt, 1996) [7] claims that the development of writing ability and that of L2 proficiency occurs in similar ways: that of comprehensible input with a low affective filter. Writing competence can be acquired from substantial amounts of reading for interest and pleasure. Writers such as Stotsky (1983) [27], Spack (1985) [26], Janopoulos (1986) [14], Cobine (1995) [5], Mason and Krashen (1997) [17], Lao and Krashen (2002) [16], Krashen (2006) [15] and Glenn (2007) [11] found evidence of a relationship between reading and writing. Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014) argue that extensive reading program encouraged learners to use the skills learned when writing an essay, this therefore, developed their writing skills. Stotsky (1983) [27] contends that very little research in reading has examined the influence of writing instruction on the development of reading comprehension. It was therefore concluded that more

research in this regard needs to be conducted. Moreover, it was concluded that those who read well also write well: those who read poorly also write poorly.

### 1.4 Models of reading-writing relationships

Eisterholdt (1996) explains the three models of reading-writing relationships which suggest the direction in which input is transferred from one modality (reading or writing) to the other. Evidence was found for all three models: The directional, non-directional and bidirectional models and they may be applicable to L2.

- **The Directional hypothesis**

According to this hypothesis the input can be either be from reading to writing, or writing to reading in the development of reading and writing skills. The claim here is that the transfer of skills can only occur in one direction, the reading to writing one being the most common one (Eisterholdt, 1996 [7]; Mason & Krashen, 1997 [17]; Falk-Ross 2002 [9]; Lao and Krashen, 2002 [16]; Rao, 2005 [24]).

- **The non-directional hypothesis**

This model suggests that 'transfer can occur in either direction' (Eisterholdt, 1996, p. 91) [7]. The argument is that since there is one cognitive proficiency that underlies both reading and writing, improvement in one area will cause improvement in the other (Eisterholdt, 1996) [7].

- **The bidirectional hypothesis**

This model claims that reading and writing are interactive, but also interdependent (Eisterholdt, 1996). According to this view, multiple relations are involved in the reading and writing modalities and it is also possible that the nature of the reading-writing connection might change with development. The influence of writing on reading seems to decrease in the upper grades because students receive more reading input than writing tasks. It was also found that the reading-writing model is superior to the writing-reading model, possibly because more reading information is used in writing than the opposite (Eisterholdt, 1996) [7]. This observation lies at the heart of the current research. In this research project, an attempt was made to establish if the learners get sufficient time for reading as well as writing. With 40 learners in a class in government schools teachers seem to have little time for marking and grading written work. The obvious remedy would be to strike a balance between reading input and practice as well as guidance in writing. This is because "When taught together, reading and writing engage learners in a greater use and variety of cognitive strategies than when taught separately" (Glenn, 2007, p.10) [11].

- **The multidirectional hypothesis**

This model as discussed by Glenn (2007) is closely related to the bidirectional model. It refers to a multidirectional relationship between reading and writing. Glenn (2007) [11] and Zamel (1992) argue that reading improves writing because it provides

learners with models to copy. Also, reading is an indispensable part of the writing process — one has to read what one writes, and writing in response to a text helps readers to understand that text better.

### 1.5 The writing-reading relationship

Glenn's study (2007) [11] indicated that writing authentic texts helped learners acquire the very reading habits necessary when they are expected to analyze a piece of literature, which are the behaviours of good readers. Given the opportunity to write like real writers, learners were highly motivated to read and often chose texts that served their needs as authors. The process helped them analyze the texts they were reading critically, 'through the distinctive lens of an author' (Glenn, 2007) [11]. The New Literacy school of thought is in accordance with the notions discussed above. Learners are regarded as authors and meaning makers (Falk-Ross, 2002) [9]. In other words, a good relationship was also found between writing quality and reading experience; good writers did more leisure time reading than poor writers (Tsang, 1996) [28].

### 1.6 Using literature to enhance reading and writing, striking a balance

Spack (1985) [26] presents arguments in favour of using literature in an ESL class to enhance reading and writing skills. She recommends activities which actively engage learners in the meaning making process while reading and writing, resulting in the ability to interpret discourse and the production of the type of texts required at tertiary level. This type of exercise could also be useful at school level. She argues that literature and non-fiction can be used to raise awareness among learners of the different types of texts writers write to engage readers (Spack, 1985) [26]. Learners should be able to understand why and how texts are written, and this understanding should be useful when they compose their own texts. In addition, they should realize that what they write will be read by someone else (Spack, 1985 [26]; Oster, 1989 [21]; Van Wyk, 2002 [30]). Other linguists, concur that extensive reading results in enhancement of various reading skills, a broader range of vocabulary that results in content rich essays (Atilgan, 2013 [3]) and improved writing skills (Elly (2000) [8]; Ghosn, (2000) [10]; Willemse (2005) [33] Shany and Biemiller (2009) [25]. It was also found, in a more recent study that extensive reading had a major impact on the writing skills of participants in the experimental group of the study (Alqadi & Alqadi, 2013) [1].

One can therefore, conclude that there seems to be substantial evidence in favour of the reading-writing relationship, i.e. that reading has a positive influence on writing development. However, some evidence of the writing-reading relationship also exists in the literature, although more research is needed about the influence of writing on reading and writing. It is thought that the modalities are intertwined and the relationships are complicated. According to the bidirectional hypothesis, reading and writing are interactive. The multidirectional hypothesis claims that reading is an indispensable part of

writing and vice versa. Spack (1985) used a literature programme to strike a balance between reading and writing instruction. It can therefore be concluded that using reading as well as writing might enhance the writing skills of the learners in question.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The population of this study consisted of Grade 5 learners in the informal settlement of the Windhoek Education Region. Two Grade Five classes of 40 learners in each class formed the sample of this study. The medium of instruction at the school is English, but the learners have different home languages, i.e. Afrikaans, Khoekhoegowab and Otjiherero. A mixed method approach was employed using the convenient sampling technique. According Cresswell (2003) [6], collecting diverse types of data facilitates understanding of the problem (Cresswell, 2003) [6]. Questionnaires were administered to both groups to determine their reading behaviour, preferences and attitudes. Secondly, a quasi-experiment was set up, as intact groups of subjects were worked with (Brown, 1990) [4]. The purpose for choosing a sequential explanatory design was to use qualitative results to assist in explaining and interpreting quantitative data. The two phases were given equal priority (Creswell, 2003) [6].

The researchers administered questionnaires to seventy learners to gain biographical data as well as information about the Grade Five learners' reading preferences and attitudes towards reading. Thereafter, the first phase of a pre-test post-test experimental design was completed. All participants wrote a battery of pre-tests assessing their reading and writing skills. An Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) test was administered to assess the learners' fluency in reading, in other words (Hasbrouk & Tindal, 2006) [13]. Two other reading pre-tests were written by both groups, i.e. a comprehension test to assess their understanding of a passage read, and a vocabulary levels test (Nation, 2001) [20] to assess their vocabulary skills. The pre-test for writing entailed a short paragraph they had to write. The marks of the tests were recorded.

In the second phase the comparison and experimental groups were taught their normal Grade 5 ESL syllabus, while the experimental group also received the intervention. During the intervention the experimental group was given opportunities for extensive reading and practice and assistance in writing. The learners were allowed time to read storybooks after which they had to do follow-up activities after. These entailed retelling the stories or discussing the stories in small groups as well as writing about the stories, e.g. writing short summaries. However, because of time constraints the opportunities for writing practice were fewer than the reading sessions. Qualitative data were gathered by means of a case study, i.e. diary entries, observations of learner behaviour during the reading sessions and short informal discussions with a sub-group of ten learners in the experimental group. The

learners had to write diary entries on a regular basis to relate on their experiences regarding the intervention. In the last phase of the research quantitative data were gathered again when all the participants wrote post-tests, the same tests they wrote at the beginning and an ORF test was administered again. The tests were marked and the marks recorded.

### 3. RESULTS

More than one method of enquiry to get better and more reliable data were used. The results derived from the questionnaires were in some cases corroborated by data derived from the case studies of some of the participants in the experimental group. Using more than one method of data collection in research is thought to improve one's chances of getting better and more reliable data (Grix, 2004) [12].

#### Questionnaires and a Case study

The results of the reading attitude questionnaires completed by both groups indicated that learners were positive about pleasure reading, and the insights gained through the case studies done with the experimental group corroborate this finding. Moreover, learners' behaviour during the reading sessions indicated an increased interest in story reading and participation in oral discussions of the stories.

These changes can be attributed to the exposure to pleasure reading and subsequent follow-up oral and writing activities. The case studies, which were qualitative in nature provided data that gave a more comprehensive description of the participants. Insights gained through the reading attitude survey and the case studies are also consistent with studies done before that indicated the positive impact of pleasure reading on learners' and students' reading skills (Lao & Krashen, 2000) [16]. Since more time was spent on pleasure reading than on writing practice during this particular study, it can be concluded that pleasure reading contributed to the improvement in performance to a larger extent than did practice in writing. Below are a few extracts taken from the learners' journals to verify the opinion that their attitudes may have changed during the intervention phase. Pseudo names are used for learners.

#### Extracts from diary entries

- Nelly: "I wanted to take the book home to read."
  - "I love the story that I read and it was very fun." (sic)

- Maria: "I like reading and I like the books that are fiction. Some books are very
  - interesting."
- John: "I like reading because in the reading there nice story." (sic)
- Rhona: "Reading is fun and nice. I am very interested to read a story." (sic)
- Lucy: "I love reading because I did not know how to read and write."
- Ken: "I liked reading eversins I was in grade 1 and now I like more." (sic)

### 4. ANALYSIS OF PRE- AND POST- TESTS

Independent t-tests were administered because the comparison and experimental groups performed independently of each other i.e. to show that there did not exist any difference before the intervention between the two groups with regard to writing skills. Independent t-tests are performed to compare the participants in the experimental group and the participants in the comparison group, i.e. different groups at the same time (Tuckmann, 1999) [29]. They were also compared in terms of their scores in the pre- and post-tests

The data gathered through pre- and post- tests were analyzed by means of paired T-tests. Paired T-tests were applied because the same tests were used as pre- and post-tests and administered to the same learners, therefore the same group of participants is compared at two different times (Tuckmann, 1999) [29]. The 5B class was the experimental group, i.e. the group that received the intervention, the 5A class was the comparison group. The same four tests were administered to the learners in both groups as pre- and post-tests for writing, reading comprehension, ORF and vocabulary.

### 5. DISCUSSION

The discussion of results involves an integration of the results from the quantitative and qualitative methods and I will point out how the results of the one help to extend and elaborate on that of the other (Cresswell, 2003) [6]. The discussion will reveal whether the intervention has resulted in the improvement of participants' reading and writing skills, or not.

In Table 1, the results are presented in a way that makes the comparison of the group scores easy.

**Table 1: Results of measures in pre- and post-tests for the experimental and comparison groups**

Groups	Pre-test	N	Post-test	n
<b>Vocabulary</b>				
Exp.g. 5B	20.8 (5.229)	38	24.03 (4.863)	38
Comp.gr. 5A	19.06 (5.138)	36	22.39 (5.395)	36
<b>Reading (ORF)</b>				
Exp gr. 5B	52.45 (26.774)	40	70.98 (32.492)	40
Comp gr. 5A	47.08 (31.345)	37	61.57 (35.794)	37
<b>Writing</b>				
Exp gr. 5B	3.36 (1.641)	36	5.08 (1.746)	36

Comp gr. 5A	4.19 (2.402)	37	3.68 (1.857)	37
Reading compr				
Exp gr. 5B	5.32 (3.316)	40	7.42 (4.296)	40
Comp gr. 5A	5.08 (2.823)	40	5.95 (3.551)	40

**The means of the raw scores are given in the columns marked pre-test and post-test.**

“The mean is the sum of all the scores divided by the number of scores” (Wiersma, 1995, p. 340) [31]. The number of scores is indicated by ‘n’ in columns 3 and 4, and the standard deviations, which indicate the measure of variability (Mouton, 2009) [19] is given in brackets and in bold in the post-test column. The results clearly show that for vocabulary, ORF (Oral Reading Fluency), reading comprehension and writing, the experimental group (5B) performed better in all four tests, but the gains were not significant statistically.

Consequently, it is evident that learners who participated in the intervention programme, that entailed the incorporation of pleasure reading and some practice in writing skills increased their skills in vocabulary, ORF, reading comprehension and writing more than the comparison group, albeit not always significantly. These findings support Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman’s (2014) [2] findings who also found that the experimental group outperformed the control group.

**Therefore the hypothesis, i.e. extensive reading and practice in writing enhance learners’ reading and writing skills, is true.**

The fact that the differences were not significant can be ascribed to the fact that the intervention was done over a period of only 30 weeks. Previous research on pleasure reading indicates that “the most successful studies are those that last for longer than one academic year. Short-term studies produce positive, but less spectacular results, most likely because it usually takes readers some time to settle in and find suitable reading materials” (Krashen, 2006, p. 3) [15]. The latter was exactly what happened during the study at issue. Moreover, due to institutional constraints from UNAM and the school, the research period could not be extended beyond thirty weeks.

In brief, a comparison of the post-test results for the experimental group (5B) and the experimental group (5A) indicated gains in scores of both groups, in all four post-tests for the experimental group and in three of the post-tests for the comparison group. Furthermore, it is evident that the experimental group performed better in all four post-tests than the comparison group, which suggests that the improvement in the former scores can be attributed to the intervention, i.e. incorporation of pleasure reading and opportunities for practice in writing.

Triangulation of data from the questionnaires and a case study (the latter was conducted only with the experimental group) indicated a change of attitude amongst learners in the experimental group. There is evidence of an even more positive attitude towards reading, interest in reading and increase in willingness to discuss the stories. However, although there was a slight improvement in

writing it seemed that learners did not like to write about the stories, and their writing of the diary entries were very limited in scope.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rationale for the research conducted was poor reading skills among learners at primary schools, which result firstly, in unsatisfactory performance in writing and ultimately in poor academic achievement. The system of automatic promotion implemented in Namibian schools results in learners passing a grade even without having acquired the basic competencies in reading to do so. Consequently, teachers in upper grades of the primary school, secondary school and even lecturers at tertiary institutions still have to deal with poor reading and writing abilities of learners and students. The research problem is embedded in the relationship between reading and writing. Therefore the primary hypothesis that was tested was: Extensive reading and practice in writing enhance learners’ reading and writing skills.

The research studies discussed in the paper, report on the influence of reading on writing, and vice versa. The general consensus that was reached is that the two modalities are intertwined and the relationship between them complicated. A number of research studies showed evidence of the positive impact of pleasure reading on learners’ reading and writing, and that practice in writing also enhances reading and writing skills. Therefore the current research project investigated the influence of both pleasure reading and practice in writing on the reading and writing skills of Grade Five learners in an informal settlement in Windhoek. The analysis of the findings of the research indicated that the experimental group performed better in reading comprehension, ORF, vocabulary and writing than the comparison group. Since the latter did not participate in the programme of pleasure reading and practice in writing, it can be concluded that the hypothesis is confirmed: Extensive reading and practice in writing enhance learners’ reading and writing skills.

It goes without saying, therefore, that firstly, an incorporation of an extensive or pleasure reading programme into syllabuses at all school levels is imperative, because attention to reading improves reading (Pretorius, 2002) [23]. To implement such a programme schools should be equipped with libraries where enough books of fiction and other reading materials are kept, in order for learners to have more access to books and more opportunities for reading. Secondly, learners should receive more instruction and practice in writing. Since more information is needed on the direct influence of

writing on reading and writing, more research in this regard needs to be conducted

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