

Rhetorical Reading for Writing Strategies

Irena Kuzborska*

University of York, UK

DOI: 10.22236/JER_Vol4Issue1pp1-7

This article is based on the plenary talk given at the inaugural UHAMKA International Conference on English Language Teaching (ELT) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (UICELL 2018) in Jakarta, Indonesia, 23 November 2018, and focuses on the explanation of reading as a communicative rhetorical act. Outlining the key features of such reading, it then considers the benefits of reading texts rhetorically. A specific focus is given to the role of rhetorical reading in writing. While the article acknowledges the limited research on the relationship, it provides some evidence that reading texts rhetorically can lead to both more effective reading and more effective writing. A specific technique on how to teach students to read texts rhetorically is also presented in this article.

Key words: rhetorical reading, writing, academic success

Artikel ini dikembangkan dari sesi plenari pada 'UHAMKA International Conference on English Language Teaching (ELT) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (UICELL 2018)' di Jakarta, Indonesia, 23 November 2018, and fokus pada pemaparan keterampilan membaca sebagai tindakan retorika komunikatif. Diawali dengan fitur utama membaca, lalu menyinggung keuntungan teks secara retorika. Fokus spesifik ditekankan pada peran retorika membaca dalam menulis. Meskipun artikel ini tidak banyak membahas penelitian yang mengkaji hubungan, artikel ini menyajikan bukti bahwa membaca retorika teks dapat menjadikan membaca dan menulis menjadi lebih efektif. Teknis khusus tentang bagaimana mengajarkan siswa membaca teks secara retorik juga dibahas di artikel ini.

INTRODUCTION

Reading for the purpose of writing is now common in academic settings (Flower et al, 1990; Kuzborska, 2015; Kuzborska & Soden, 2018; Nesi & Gardner, 2012; Zhao & Hirvela, 2015). Students are required to read multiple source texts, to evaluate various and often conflicting points of views embedded in texts, to express their own views and to present those views in

* Corresponding author. Email: irena.kuzborska@york.ac.uk

ISSN: 2502-292X, e-ISSN 2527-7448.

© 2019, English Education Program, Graduate School

University of Muhammadiyah Prof. DR. HAMKA Jakarta

DOI: 10.22236/JER_Vol4Issue1

writing. In other words, in addition to reading texts for information and facts, students are also expected to identify authors' stance towards those facts and to respond to that stance. The emphasis is, thus, on the communicative nature of reading where readers are viewed not as isolated individuals reading texts for mere facts and information, as in the cognitivist view of reading, but as active members of a specific discourse community using texts as a means to communicate with other members of the community.

In this article, I will first explain reading as a communicative activity and will then argue that the key feature of any communication, including communication via texts, is the consideration of a rhetorical context. Highlighting the key elements of the context, that is, purpose, audience, and the way authors construct texts, I will then outline the benefits of reading texts rhetorically. I will end the article with a technique on how to teach students to read texts rhetorically.

READING AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACT

The communicative and situated nature of reading is the underlying feature of the social constructivist view of reading. From this perspective, texts are seen as written by real people and used as a means to interact with other people. As Bean et al (2014) put it, there are human authors behind texts and 'texts themselves are in a conversation with previous texts. Each text acts in a relationship to other texts' (p. 6). Similarly, Leki (1993, p. 21) recommends looking at a text as 'a partner in a dialogue, in a negotiation', where the other partner is the reader, each contributing to the dialogue. To better understand reading as a communicative activity, Bean et al (2014) advise to think of 'writers as talking to readers' and then 'think of readers as talking back' (p. 5). Moreover, given a variety of texts or voices manifested in texts, one should also think of the multi-voiced dialogue present in texts. In this dialogue, as Bean et al (2014, pp. 5-6) explain, '[t]he first voice is that of the text's author; a second voice (actually a set of voices) is the network of other writers the author refers to - previous participants in the conversation'; and the third voice is the reader's as they 'respond to the text while [they] read, and later when [they] write something about it'. Thus, as this view of reading suggests, to read texts successfully, one's understanding of reading as a dialogic meaning construction activity is paramount. Students are advised to move beyond the simple, information-exchange view of reading where texts are seen as containing mere information, to a more complex rhetorical view of reading where texts are viewed as embodying people's voices and where the interaction with those voices is central for effective communication via texts to take place.

RHETORICAL READING STRATEGIES

The key to any effective communication, including written communication, is the consideration of a rhetorical context. The rhetorical context is a situation in which reading occurs and involves such essential elements as a reader reading a text, a writer of the text being read, a reader's purpose for reading the text, a writer's purpose for writing the text, the message itself and the way the message is constructed. These contextual elements are present every time readers engage in reading and should be, therefore, considered in order to read texts effectively. In other words, as the word *rhetoric* suggests, to read texts rhetorically, readers should pay attention to 'a writer's relationship to and intentions toward an audience' (Bean et al, 2014, p. 9) as well as rhetorical means that writers use to attract and persuade their audience. A good

example of the reader's ability to build a rhetorical context for reading is by Feldman (1996). Feldman (1996) interviewed one of the expert readers Professor Lynn Weiner, a social historian, and showed how this Professor considered the context when approaching to read a chapter entitled 'From the Medieval to the Modern Family' from Philippe Aries's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, written in 1962. Her thinking is as follows:

This work isn't precisely in my field and it is a difficult text. I also know it by its reputation. But, like any student, I need to create a context in which to understand this work. When the book was written, the idea of studying the family was relatively new. Before this time historians often studied kings, presidents, and military leaders. That's why this new type of social history encouraged us to ask, 'How did ordinary people live? 'Not the kings, but the families in the middle ages. Then we have to ask: 'Which families is [Aries] talking about? What causes the change that he sees? ... For whom is the change significant?' ... I'll want to be careful not ... to assume the old family is bad and the new family is good. The title suggests a transition so I'll be looking for sign of it.... A path-breaking book, it was credited with advancing the idea that childhood as a stage of life is historically constructed and not the same in every culture and every time. In my own work I might refer to Aries as I think and write about families as they exist today (pp. 16-17, 25-29, as cited in Bean et al, 2014, p. 31).

As the example illustrates, during reading, the Professor attempts to reconstruct the text's rhetorical context by considering the author Aries, the time the author created the text, the author's purpose and the audience he is addressing in the text. The Professor is also evaluating the evidence that Aries provides to support his claims and is assessing the value of the author's ideas in terms of her own reading purposes, that is, the extent to which she could apply the author's ideas in her own work as a social historian. All these considerations are the Professor's specific actions that she uses to communicate with the text's author. Haas and Flower (1988, p. 176) refer to these actions as rhetorical reading strategies that 'take a step beyond the text itself' (p. 176). As they explain,

They [rhetorical reading strategies] are concerned with constructing a rhetorical situation for the text, trying to account for author's purpose, context, and effect on the audience. In rhetorical reading strategies readers use cues in the text, and their own knowledge of discourse situations, to recreate or infer the rhetorical situation of the text they are reading.

Thus, the rhetorical context can provide a wealth of information to readers in terms of how to read and how to construct meanings appropriate to specific situations. By considering the rhetorical context, readers can better understand authors' purposes and their intended audience as well as be more aware of their own reading purposes and the types of meanings they need to create to achieve their specific purposes. The reader's attention to rhetorical choices that authors made when constructing texts is particularly important. By considering those choices, readers can better recognise the effects that authors intend to exert on their

readers. In short, it is the ability to create a mental model of the reading situation and to make use of that situation that can lead to reading texts successfully.

THE ROLE OF RHETORICAL READING IN WRITING

It has been argued that reading texts rhetorically, that is, building a text's rhetorical context and paying attention to a writer's strategies when constructing a text can be beneficial for writing. Analysing a text's rhetorical context as readers read can enable them to frame a response in terms of their own rhetorical context. As Bean et al (2014) argue, 'rhetorical reading leads to rhetorically powerful writing' (p. 120). This is because, they explain, '[s]trong writers use the knowledge and understanding gained from their reading to build their own authority so that they can, in turn, *author* their own texts.' (Bean et al, 2014, p. 120).

The seminal study that showed the benefits of rhetorical reading is by Haas & Flower (1988). Using think-aloud protocols, they examined reading strategies of four experienced graduate first language (L1) students and six college freshmen L1 students when they read a typical college text. While only a very small number of rhetorical strategies were employed by these students, those who used them, understood the text better. The rhetorical readers recognised and assimilated more facts and claims into their reading of the text than those readers who only used content and function strategies. The study by Wineburg (1991) provides further evidence of beneficial effects of rhetorical reading. Focusing on reading by historians as expert readers and high school students as novice readers, they showed that while the historians analysed the author's views expressed in the text and the text's intended effects on readers, the students only focused on the understanding of the text content.

Research investigating the specific role of rhetorical reading in writing also confirms the benefits of rhetorical reading. While this line of research is still emerging, and more studies are needed to understand this relationship, the existing evidence, nevertheless, suggests that reading texts rhetorically can help readers create their own texts more successfully (Plakans, 2009, 2010; Plakans & Gebriel, 2012; Zhao & Hirvela, 2015). For example, in Plakans' (2009) qualitative study with 12 ESL students, she focused on the role of mining strategies in the synthesis writing. Mining strategies were defined as readers' selection of specific information from a text for the purpose of writing (Greene, 1992) and were, thus, similar to a rhetorical strategy to pay attention to the author's rhetorical choices that they make when creating texts. Using think-aloud protocols, students' written products and interviews with them, the study revealed that it was higher scoring writers who used more mining strategies than lower scoring writers. A recent qualitative study that specifically focused on rhetorical reading and its role in the synthesis writing is by Zhao and Hirvela (2015). Choosing two Chinese students, one high-scoring writer and one low-scoring writer who were enrolled in an ESL university composition course and using think-aloud protocols, synthesis papers, and stimulated recall interviews with the students, they showed that the higher scoring writer used a variety of strategies, including rhetorical strategies, but the lower scoring writer did not use any rhetorical strategies.

Thus, while the research on the relationship between reading and writing is still limited, there is, nevertheless, some evidence to suggest that reading texts rhetorically can help readers become not only more effective readers but also more effective writers. Readers can learn about specific choices that writers make when creating a text and then consider using similar choices in their own writing. For example, when reading texts, students can learn about typical

organisational patterns used in specific disciplines (for example, what to say first, when to reveal the thesis, how to arrange the parts, how to format the document), linguistic features (for example, what discourse markers to use in a certain type of writing), stylistic characteristics of writing (for example, the use of formal or semi-formal vocabulary, the use of lots of jargon or no jargon, the use of complex or easy sentence structures), as well as the author's choices about text content (for example, what to include and exclude).

TEACHING HOW TO READ TEXTS RHETORICALLY

One of the important techniques of how to teach students to read texts rhetorically is writing a rhetorical précis. A rhetorical précis, as Bean et al (2014) explain, 'provides a structured model for describing rhetorical strategies of a text, as well as for capturing the gist of its content' (Bean et al, 2014, pp. 62-63). In other words, it presents both a concise summary of a text and considers the key elements of the rhetorical situation. Thus, when asking students to write a rhetorical précis, they need to present a brief summary of the content as well as to provide statements about the author's purpose for writing a text, their intended audience and the way the author constructed the text to achieve their writing purposes. A good example of a rhetorical précis is provided by Bean et al (2014, pp. 63-64). They present the following four-sentence paragraph written by a student called Jaime of the *UC Berkeley Wellness Letter's* "Chew on This" article, and which can serve as a useful model of how to read texts rhetorically:

¹A UC Berkeley Wellness Letter article, "Chew on This" (Feb. 2012), summarizes recent research on the possible benefits of gum-chewing and reports that so far, this research shows only small or brief benefits. ²The author notes first that gum-chewing may increase saliva flow that prevents cavities (but should not replace brushing and flossing), but then takes a "maybe" approach when reporting that gum-chewing's possible benefits for both weight maintenance and brain stimulation are limited and short-lived. ³The fact that this article fills the newsletter's customary spot for brief research reports establishes the author's purpose as informative, but its informal tone suggests that it is written to amuse as well as to inform. ⁴The author assumes an audience of well-educated readers who have high interest in health and wellness issues but a cautious attitude toward research findings, and thus is able to use a humorous tone as well as a clever, punning title that implicitly warns that what is being reported is something to "chew on" but not to be taken as certain.

In this example, the student states the key ideas of the *Wellness Letter* article and also considers the essential elements of the article's rhetorical context. In the first sentence, Jaime specifies the name of the author, the type of the text, the title of the work, and the date in parentheses. In addition, he uses a 'that' clause containing the thesis statement in the work. In the second sentence, Jaime considers the author's development of the thesis and the way the author supports his thesis. Using the words 'first' and 'then', Jaime shows the development of the thesis in a chronological order. The third sentence is about the author's purpose and is a good example of how the author's purpose is considered in reading the article. The fourth sentence describes the intended audience and the author's relationship with the audience. Paying attention to the way authors communicate with their audience, that is, the language they

use in their texts and the way they present content, is particularly important. A conscious understanding of authors' rhetorical choices can help readers not only recognise their intended effects on the audience but also create their own texts more effectively.

Importantly, the consideration of one's own rhetorical context is also vital. As Bean et al (2014) point out, when students are assigned reading, they should 'think not only about the authors' rhetorical context, but also about [their] own' (p. 27). Thus, an important question that every rhetorical reader should ask is 'How do this author's evident purpose for writing fit my purposes for reading? (How will I be able to use what I have learned from the text?)'. The answers to the question (and to many other rhetorical questions that can be asked as recommended by Bean et al, 2014, pp. 10-11) will influence the way readers will read texts. In an academic discipline, the reading purpose will always be determined by an assignment prompt. The audience will typically be students' tutors who will be assessing the task, other classmates with whom meanings of the text will be shared or some other audience, such as, for example, participants in a research conference or readers of a certain magazine or blog. By identifying the reading purposes and audience at the start of reading, students will then be aware of what types of texts to select and how to read those texts. Such purposeful and conscious reading behaviour will also enable students to work efficiently helping them save their time. In addition, as Bean et al (2014, p. 36) argue, it 'will help [students] maintain a sense of [their] own authority as [they] read, a notion that is very important for college writing'.

CONCLUSION

This article argued that reading texts rhetorically is an essential strategy for students' academic success. Recognising the influence of the rhetorical context and considering its essential elements, such as purpose, audience and rhetorical choices used to create a text, can help students in their own writing. As academic assignments often ask students to read a variety of texts and to respond to those texts in writing, the importance of interacting with texts and their authors as well as other authors referred to in the texts was, thus, emphasised. While, at first, rhetorical reading strategies could be challenging to learn, especially to those with different previous reading experiences, where texts were viewed as containing mere facts and information, with appropriate practice and support, they can become the skills that can lead students to more powerful reading. Thus, one of the key recommendations for language teachers is to help students develop these strategies. Inviting students to write a rhetorical précis could be one of the important techniques to teach students how read texts rhetorically.

REFERENCES

- Bean, J., Chappell, V.A., Gillam, A.M. (2014). *Reading rhetorically* (4th ed). Boston: Pearson.
- Feldman, A. (1996). *Writing and learning in the disciplines*. New York: Harper.
- Flower, L., Stein, V., Ackerman, J., Kantz, M. J., McCormick, K., & Peck, W. C. (1990). *Reading-to-write. Exploring a cognitive and social process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greene, S. (1992). Mining texts in reading-to-write. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 12(1), 151-170.
- Haas, C., & Flower, L. (1988). Rhetorical reading strategies and the construction of meaning. *College Composition and Communication*, 39, 167-183.

- Kuzborska, I. (2015). Perspective taking in second language academic reading: A longitudinal study of international students' reading experiences. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 20, 149-161.
- Kuzborska, I., & Soden, B. (2018). The construction of opposition relations in high-, middle-, and low-rated postgraduate ESL Chinese students' essays. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 34, 68-85.
- Leki, I. (1993). Reciprocal themes in ESL reading and writing. In J.G. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the composition classroom: Second language perspectives* (pp. 9-32). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Nesi, Sh., & Gardner, H. (2012). *Genres across the disciplines: Student writing in higher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plakans, L.M. (2009). The role of reading strategies in integrated L2 writing tasks. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 8(4), 252-266.
- Plakans, L.M. (2010). Independent vs. Integrated Writing Tasks: A comparison of task representation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44 (1), 185-194.
- Plakans, L. M., & Gebriel, A. (2012). A close investigation into source use in L2 integrated writing tasks. *Assessing Writing*, 17(1), 18-34.
- Wineburg, S. S. (1991). On the reading of historical texts: Notes on the breach between school and academy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 28, 495-519.
- Zhao, R., & Hirvela, A. (2015). Undergraduate ESL students' engagement in academic reading and writing in learning to write a synthesis paper. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 27(2), 219-241.