

## **Pre-service English teachers' strengths and challenges when reading and writing**

[Fortalezas y desafíos en lectura y escritura de docentes en formación]

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**Abstract.** Reading scientific or literary works and developing academic writing in English can bring up challenges for students no matter their language proficiency. This article is the result of a research study carried out with a qualitative approach at the B.A. in English at Universidad del Tolima. It aims at illustrating the strengths, challenges, conceptions and expectations of a group of pre-service teachers and at fostering the use of strategies that can help them re-shape their conceptions in a reading and composition class. Different approaches were used in order to help learners reach their goals, including the use of portfolios and metacognitive strategies. At the end, it was evident that most students' perceptions about reading and writing changed significantly. Students acknowledged that this process helped them change their attitudes and perceptions, value their background knowledge, gain new knowledge, and trust their abilities to become better readers and writers.

**Key words:** reading, writing, pre-service teachers, conceptions

**Resumen.** Leer documentos científicos y literarios, y realizar escritura académica en inglés presenta retos para los estudiantes sin importar su nivel de proficiencia lingüística. Este artículo es el resultado de una investigación con enfoque cualitativo, realizada en la Licenciatura en inglés de la Universidad del Tolima y busca ilustrar las fortalezas, desafíos, concepciones y expectativas de un grupo de docentes en formación y promover el uso de estrategias que ayuden a replantear sus concepciones en una clase de lectura y composición. Se usó diferentes enfoques con el objetivo de ayudar a los aprendices a alcanzar sus metas, incluyendo el uso de portafolios y estrategias metacognitivas. Al final, se evidenció que las percepciones de la mayoría de los estudiantes acerca de la lectura y la escritura cambiaron significativamente; ellos reconocieron que este proceso ayudó a cambiar sus actitudes y percepciones, valorar el conocimiento previo, ganar nuevo conocimiento, y confiar en sus capacidades para volverse mejores lectores y escritores.

**Palabras clave:** lectura, escritura, profesores en formación, concepciones

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## Introduction

Learning a second language is like moving to a new town – it takes time to establish connections and turn acquaintances into friends. And what is the difference between an acquaintance and a friend? An acquaintance may be forgotten, but we can never forget a friend (Thornbury, 2004). EFL teachers want students to establish such connections so as to master and internalize the target language to become successful learners. In this urge for improving teaching and learning practices, the purpose of this study is to illustrate the strengths, challenges, conceptions and expectations of pre-service English teachers in a reading and composition class at Universidad del Tolima. It portrays the strategies used in this class, which included the use of portfolios and metacognitive strategies to help learners re-shape their conceptions so as to take the best out of a course intended to facilitate their reading and writing processes in English.

In order to contribute to their development of reading and writing skills, students were exposed to a variety of activities that fostered the use of reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and making inferences. Learners went from literal to inferential to critical reading as they were exposed to different kinds of texts from poems, to letters, to articles and novels read inside and outside the classroom. The purpose was to awaken in students the need and pleasure for reading, going beyond rules, tips and guidelines to reading different text genres according to their interest.

Learners were also given the chance to write taking into account the normative, orthographic, and syllabic as the basis for writing phrases, sentences, paragraphs and essays, after having identified the rhetorical modes that fitted their creative, planned or unprompted writing purposes. Peha (2003), who gives total support to the writing process and remembers the time when he didn't get to do pre-writing, recalls the following experience:

When I was your age, we didn't get to do pre-writing. We just started with drafting, and boy was that a mess. We'd all be writing away, not having any idea what we were doing, and then...BLAMMO! Writer's block. Pencils froze up mid-sentence. Sweat started streaming from our brows. The air became thick with the palpable anxiety of young writers who knew they were in for it. (I think some kids even had to go to the nurse.) All I can say is you don't know how lucky you are to have teachers who let you do pre-writing (P. 5).

As an essential component of the writing process, reflection was encouraged through the use of portfolios as a powerful tool that fostered the use of metacognitive strategies to help students improve their writing process. The professor's feedback and use of editing symbols (see annex III) helped students understand, analyze, and correct their mistakes; they could approach a given learning task, monitor

comprehension, and evaluate progress toward the completion of the task . all of which are metacognitive strategies.

At the end, students could provide feedback on course development, analyze their own reading and writing process, and share how their attitudes and perceptions toward the development of these skills had changed and how this course had contributed to it.

### **Research questions**

This study sought to answer two questions: (1) What are the strengths, challenges, conceptions and expectations that pre-service teachers have about reading and writing? And (2) How can fostering the use of metacognitive strategies help pre-service teachers re-shape their conceptions in a reading and composition class.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Different authors' ideas on concepts relevant to this study will be presented in this section, going from general notions such as prescriptive grammar and the *laissez faire* idea, to discussing thoughts on reading, writing, metacognition and the use of portfolios in the EFL reading and writing class.

Doubtless, too, both grammarians and philosophers have been aware that it is by no means easy to distinguish even questions, commands, and so on from statements by no means of the few jejune grammatical marks available, such as word order, mood, and the like: though perhaps it has not been usual to dwell on the difficulties which this fact obviously arises. For how do we decide which is which? What are the limits and definitions of it? (Austin, 1962, p. 1).

Based on Austin's words, the discussion on what is important when we refer to language use and the structure of language itself becomes even more complex as we enter the field of language teaching and want to find an explanation for each single detail and for every utterance that the language, as a living entity offers. Of course, prescriptive grammarians are right as they try to preserve language structure and aesthetics to somehow homogenize its use, but on the other side the *laissez faire*, *laissez passer* ideas recreated by Rothbard (2006), foster people's rights to act freely, which in language learning also suggests that too much prescriptivism might limit people's critical thinking and real language use, giving more relevance to the cover than to the book itself. More elements to this discussion can be added from Bourdieu's reflections on language. He declares that the legitimate language is a kind of semi-artificial language whose main characteristics are two: **Distinction**, i.e. deviation from the most frequent, ordinary, vulgar, usages and **Correctness**, which is attended to by special institutions and individual speakers. These contribute to safeguarding the constancy of legitimate language through time and preventing it from simplification. Correctness is made possible through an incorporated grammar that is a set of rules

inductively obtained from the observation of actual facts: (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 60). This discussion makes teachers reflect upon what should be important when teaching reading and writing. During the development of this study, the necessity to establish a mid-point between being too prescriptive and hindering written communication because of grammar rules, and letting errors pass for the sake of fluency was made clear.

Then, reflecting upon language, in general, gives way to the development of more specific skills such as reading and writing. Pertaining to reading, Ortiz and Rojas (2010) identify, describe and analyze some of the most common problems and difficulties students have in their reading comprehension process. Hence, these authors believe that it is necessary to start improving these practices going beyond the prescriptive, calligraphic and syllabic as to make reading and writing become a genuine, creative, and persuasive practice with communication purposes.

Schema theory is also important when referring to reading, since it is defined as an interactive process between the text and the reader's prior background knowledge (Adams and Collins 1979, Rumelhart 1980), cited in Carrell & Eisterhold (1983). These authors discuss the important role of background knowledge in a psycholinguistic model of EFL/ESL reading and demonstrate the relevance of schema-theoretical views of reading in the teaching of reading to EFL/ESL students.

The question of writing, likewise, raises concerns from the English classroom by teachers worried about their students' low proficiency, lack of motivation or struggle to reach their linguistic goals. Based on contrastive rhetoric, Gomez (2011) presents a thorough reflection on the problems faced by his pre-service English teachers when attempting to compose a text. He quotes Widdowson (1998) to state that "the reality of language use depends on its being localized," and mentions that since his students are not in contact with a native English speaking community, they lack this localization and have thus not internalized English as a semantic source. In Jaworski and Coupland's words, they have no experience of "... exploring the interplay between language and social processes, construing language as discourse involves orienting to language as a form of social action, as a functioning form of social action embedded in the totality of social processes" (Jaworski and Coupland, 2006, p. 41). Thus, language --either in writing or speaking-- should be seen not as an isolated entity but as part of a context that takes life because of the moment of interaction. For this reason, it is important to provide students with opportunities to use language in real contexts and to write about topics that matter to them; in this way, learners will be able to see writing as a process that involves their own needs. The study which will be reported below about divergent perceptions presents the advantage of including learners' needs in lesson planning.

A study carried out by Hocking & Toh (2010) on divergent perceptions and expectations among tutors and students uncovered how students' perceptions of English academic writing and the pedagogical methods used to teach it can be a source of struggle for students as writers. This study reveals the necessity of adapting

our teaching practices to students' real learning needs. In the same line of ideas, Ferris (2011) argues that providing corrective feedback united with instruction and self-editing strategies improves students' writing.

There is no doubt that having learners understand and reflect upon their own learning process is an essential element for successful long-term learning to take place. In this regard, Livingston (1997) suggests that metacognition, which has been associated with intelligence, enables us to be successful learners. He speaks of metacognition as higher order thinking, which involves active control over the cognitive processes engaged in learning. Activities such as planning how to approach a given learning task, monitoring comprehension, and evaluating progress toward the completion of a task are metacognitive in nature. Therefore, metacognition plays a critical role in successful learning, overall in the development of writing, because making learners aware of their own strengths and challenges during the writing process will help them take advantage of the strong points and work on the weak points they have. In a study about writing knowledge in EFL at a Spanish university, done by Victori (1999), some light was shed on the relationship between metacognitive knowledge (MK) and EFL writing. Students' levels of MK made a difference in their writing processes as those students who had a more appropriate and comprehensive view of the writing process were able to perform better.

Developing this further, it can be argued that a profitable way to integrate metacognition to the reading and writing processes is the use of portfolios. This is an effective alternative to follow students' reading and writing processes and to create an individual representation of each student. Authors such as O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996) state that portfolios can provide a continuous picture of student progress, rather than a snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests provide. They also argue that to make the portfolio valuable, it needs to include students' reflections and self-assessment, as a powerful tool.

To sum up, there are different views of what should be important to consider when learning a language, and more specifically when developing reading and writing skills. Gomez (2010) opposes the use of absolute integration, for he contends that teachers have no need to have their students gain absolute integration of the language and its culture, but to have them be able to identify the different contexts for using the language. If they can identify contexts, it can be argued, that it would avoid learners' use of formulaic, preconceived expressions, in a rush to sound correct, and avoid the making of mistakes. Instead, they would be encouraged to explore with new language up to the point where we have learners who exceed the typographical unit and move to a more logical, coherent, content and reality-based language. It was decided to test this argument on the basis of theory by the study described below,

## Methodology

This is a descriptive and qualitative study which aims at illustrating the strengths, challenges, conceptions and expectations of a group of pre-service teachers with respect to reading and writing and at analyzing the strategies they use, in order to help them re-shape their conceptions in a reading and composition class intended to facilitate their reading and writing processes in English. The subjects of the study were thirty-four students enrolled in the B.A. in English of Universidad del Tolima who were part of a reading and composition class. The students were taught by the author in 2 separate groups of 19 and 15 students each. The course took place twice a week, along 16 weeks, with a two-hour session each time, for a total of 64 hours of class work and 128 hours of independent work. This reading and composition class was a mandatory course for seventh-semester students in the B.A. in English. Twenty-two students were taking the subject for the first time and 12 for the second time because they had failed the previous semester. A relevant aspect to be analyzed from the very beginning was whether those 12 students' attitudes toward reading and writing differed from the rest of the students, due to their previous experience in the course. This B.A. in English is offered as an evening-time program, which limits the number of hours students spend on campus; besides, most pre-service teachers get teaching jobs before they reach their sixth semester, thanks to the high demands for English teachers. This, however, limits their time to study outside the classroom.

The instruments to analyze their conceptions and expectations and the class activities carried out to ascertain their strengths and challenges were designed to facilitate this analysis. Students were interviewed, at the beginning of the course, in order to know their expectations so as to adapt the classes to meet course goals and real individual needs. The instruments for data collection included two semi-structured questionnaires, one administered at the beginning and one at the end of the course. The first questionnaire consisted of 10 open-ended and 10 closed-ended questions. The second questionnaire had 4 open-ended and 2 closed-ended questions. Close-ended questions provided information about student's likes and practice of reading and writing, while open-ended questions allowed the author to gather ideas and specific details about other concerns, fears and positive strategies that each individual was using in his process. Having open and close ended-questions made this instrument useful because it provided not only general, but also specific information on the reading and writing process developed by the participants in this study. Other tools used to collect data were students' portfolios and use of metacognitive strategies to self-correct papers based on the instructor's feedback and use of editing symbols. Editing symbols were used as a tool to help students' use different metacognitive strategies including self knowledge, knowledge of the assignment and knowledge of the strategies to learn as proposed by Livingston (1997), so that they could *know what* to do in a specific assignment and *know how* to do it at that moment and in the future. Livingston was considered a good model to follow in this part of the data collection process because when learners develop awareness of their own writing process, they are able to solve their own learning problems in an easier way.

## The course plan

This course was planned with an ideal student population in mind, assuming certain levels of English proficiency according to the semester they were in— just 4 semesters away from commencement day. Certainly, once I met my students and got to know their reality, which differed from what I had expected, the course syllabus and activities planned prior to the beginning of the course had to be adapted to their needs and goals. In addition, some activities were changed during course development and some other implemented according to the students' learning pace. Although this was a student-centered class, it did not bind me to do only what students wanted, but my expertise in the field was taken into account to lead the class, thus being realistic about what they needed.

Given that the course had two components – reading and writing – the activities planned fostered the development of these two skills. Students' reading process was given particular attention, facilitating their reading comprehension process through the introduction of activities that fostered the use of reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, and making inferences. Learners went from literal to inferential to critical reading as they were exposed to different kinds of texts from poems to letters to articles and novels, which were read inside and outside the classroom. Reading aloud was also encouraged to support their reading and pronunciation skills. Even though a 64-hour course does not completely change students' reading practices, this course intended to awaken in students the need and pleasure for reading. More than giving students rules, tips and guidelines to follow when reading, different kinds of readings were promoted and students were given the chance to actively participate in choosing some of the readings. Hayashi (1999) states that reading a lot, in both L1 and L2, becomes basically the most important factor for improving reading skills rather than just teaching reading strategies. She also encourages extensive reading as it gives learners rich background knowledge, vocabulary recognition, and high motivation for more reading. Therefore, it becomes the basic skill of rapid reading and discovery of reading strategies by learners themselves, while increasing students' guessing ability in context.

On the other hand, the journey through writing allowed taking learners from the normative, to the orthographic, to the syllabic, travelling through the identification of parts of speech (verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and the like), phrases, and sentences, to embarking in the writing of paragraphs and essays, after having landed on rhetorical modes through practical examples. This does not mean that the normative, orthographic, and syllabic were the dead end in our development of writing; there was, indeed, the need to go further in order to find pleasure for writing through creative and unprompted writing.

Special attention was given to writing as a process. Of course, at the end, the final product is important. But how do I get there? Where do I start? – The answer to those questions is in the writing process itself. Peha (2003) suggests the following:

The writing process is the “how” of writing. The notion of writing as a process goes back to the early 1970’s when dozens of academic articles inquiring into the nature of writing began to appear. But writing as a process goes back even further than that—*way, way* back. Indeed, all writers have used one “process” or another to render their ideas in print, it’s the nature of the beast; words just don’t magically materialize on a page or a computer screen every time we want them to. So writing as a process is as old as writing itself. It’s just that in the last 30 years or so, we’ve thought to inquire about exactly what processes might best be shown to students to help them grow as writers (P. 30).

Portfolios were of great help to systematize students’ writing process. Students were asked to create a portfolio from the beginning of the course, in which they collected all the writing they produced during the semester. In order to have the portfolio as a useful tool that fostered the use of metacognitive strategies, and so forth helped students reflect and improve their writing process, each piece of writing produced by students was checked by the instructor who provided feedback using editing symbols, so that students had to really think about the betterment of their papers. This way, I did not provide students with the solution to correct their mistakes, but I underlined, highlighted and commented on what was to be improved for them to discover the solution after reflecting. All of this to help them think, understand and reflect upon their own learning process as they learned how to approach a given learning task, monitored comprehension, and evaluated progress toward the completion of a task. Once students had understood what was to be improved in the writing piece, they would improve it and include it in the portfolio, along with their first draft.

In spite of giving all students the same guidelines, and emphasizing the creation of portfolios as a reflective experience, every portfolio looked different in the end, ranging from careless ones that used a reused folder as cover and had very little reflection, to nicely decorated ones, rich in content and reflections. Students also expressed pros and cons of the use of the portfolio. Some of the *pros* included the following:

- It allows us to organize our material and to follow a process.
- We can check our mistakes and learn more.
- The teacher can have control of the students’ learning.
- It is a good way to learn about anything you are doing, so it is good that teachers and students see it as a good process through which you can improve every day.
- It is good because I improve thanks to my teacher’s feedback.
- You can correct all the mistakes during a course.
- It is a great opportunity to learn, reflect and improve.
- It gives you the chance to learn from your mistakes.
- I can learn more if I correct all my writings.
- It develops creativity.
- Reflections in the portfolio are important.
- It shows students’ progress.



The *cons* included the following:

- We spend too much time repeating the exercises.
- It takes time to do it.
- Sometimes teachers ask for creativity, but I am not creative at all.
- Some students are not interested in it.
- No cons; it is great and useful.

Students' negative ideas on the use of a portfolio originate in the time they have to invest correcting papers. At the end, however, they realize the profit they get when they can see in a folder all their papers together, following a logical order and evidencing the progress they have made during the course.

Among the most fruitful activities carried out to develop reading and writing during this course are those that promoted reflection and self-correction of mistakes, or other partners' mistakes (punctuation, parts of speech and word choice exercises); those that encouraged cooperative learning (think, pair, share, group stories); the ones that fostered creativity (jumble story and speak a minute non-stop), the ones where students could take the lead (share something with the class), and the ones that involved process (write a paragraph, write the final essay). The most common mistakes found and corrected during the course had to do with parallelism, word order, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, pronoun agreement, verb inflection and word choice, syntax and cohesion, as well as failure to take time for planning and revision.

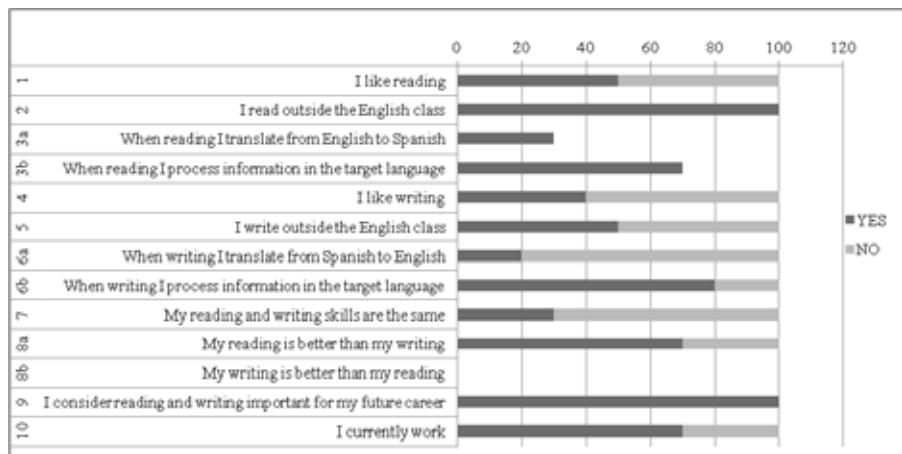
A presentation about the importance of the *writing process* was done, which emphasized two stages that might not seem quite relevant, but that deserve time: *planning and revision*. Rogers (2001) presents a very detailed description of the writing process which was considered during this class. He proposes the following steps to writing: Pre-writing (understanding or deciding the writing topic, brainstorming and outlining), developing your writing (organizing your ideas based on your initial plan) and checking your writing (correcting structural, mechanical, and grammatical problems). These steps were considered during the development of the writing process, and so in the final essay time was granted for in-class planning and revision. In this regard, students had to follow a process to plan, write, and improve their writings. Therefore, each student could be given individual feedback during his writing process.

## Results

At the beginning of this course, like at the beginning of any other course I have taught, after having my students introduce themselves and lower their affective filter by means of a fun memory activity, I wanted to hear about their class expectations, goals and needs. Very deeply, I also had my own expectations, probably more than they did, since having students with a variety of attitudes toward reading and writing and having 12 out of 34 students taking the class for the second time posed some

challenge, for I thought that their class expectations, motivation, and performance would be biased and different from the rest of the class. In fact, the initial interview with these students evidenced that there was a slight difference in their conceptions and expectations, since they seemed to be more at ease in class, as they mentioned that they already had some basis on reading and writing processes and that they now knew how to approach a course like this one. Besides, when expressing their lack of interest in reading and the difficulties they had faced in the previous class when writing, some suggested that reading passages left for homework should be short and with large font size. Likewise, they wanted to have fun classes and a nice class environment. Most students, however, admitted their limitations in reading and writing and expressed their desire to improve these skills as key elements for their future teaching career. Nonetheless, nobody posed a challenge for me or showed any interest in wanting to read more complex texts or being given many opportunities to improve their writing. Many students accepted their need for improvement, but they didn't seem to see improvement as part of their own responsibility. As for the initial survey, there was a variety of answers according to the students' general background, limitations, strengths and challenges when reading and writing. The information drawn from the first semi-structured questionnaire was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Figure # 1 depicts the answers to the 10 closed-ended questions as follows:

Figure 1 – Attitudes toward reading and writing



Students' attitudes at the beginning of the course as well as their reading and writing habits were elicited through these questions. Fifty percent of students like reading, while the rest mentioned that they barely read what was assigned by the teacher. There is a smaller number who stated that although they don't like academic reading, they read magazines, newspapers or other kind of informal information that comes across. Question number two was answered affirmatively by all students. They said that they read outside the English class, but again, fifty percent only read what

their teachers assign and do very little reading for pleasure. Question number 3a shows that thirty percent still struggle with reading in the target language, without translating into their first language which corresponds with question number 6a where twenty percent translate from Spanish to English. Even though, there is a low percentage of students who still don't process information in the target language, the intervention process done by the teacher was intended to help these students improve in that matter.

Regarding writing, only forty percent like writing, as seen in question number 4, however, some of them said that they like writing in Spanish. This means that the percentage of those who, in fact, write in the target language is even smaller as fifty percent also admit that they don't write outside the English class. Questions 7, 8a and 8b which express the differences in their writing and reading skills shows that seventy percent of the participants have developed their reading more than their writing. It seems that writing, being a productive skill, is more demanding for them, and that they find reading easier to develop. Question number 9, for example, shows a great understanding, on the part of the students, of the relevance that reading and writing have in their future career as teachers, and they acknowledge that they need to develop these skills to help their future students. Question number 10 reveals that seventy percent of the participants work, which is an issue that may prevent them from dedicating more time to reading and writing outside the classroom and so forth hindering the development of reading and writing skills. All the answers given to the different questions create a general picture of the perceptions students have regarding reading and writing. They don't seem to dedicate enough time to the development of these skills and seem to rely on the professors' decisions of the topics and moments for reading and writing.

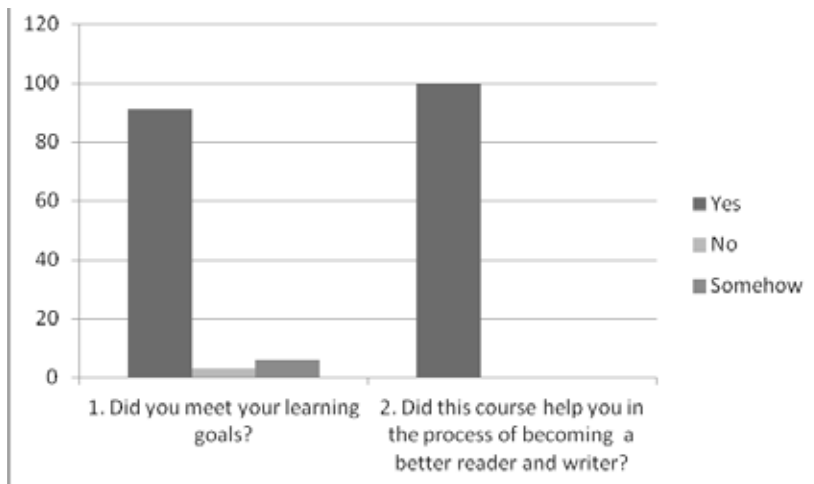
This seems to indicate that what motivates students to read and write is the extrinsic motivation of either their current professor or their future students, but not their own. In addition, these pre-service teachers are not only pre-service, but somehow in-service teachers because although they have not finished their B.A. yet, 70% of them already have teaching jobs, which should be a motivation for them to be better learners. However, on the contrary, working takes valuable time from them, time that should be dedicated to studying and mastering the language. The 10 open-ended questions drew a variety of answers that reflects and reinforces what was answered in the closed-end ones. Students read different kinds of texts such as magazines, newspapers, and other texts that they may find online, but they do not engage in much academic reading unless they are required to do so. When asked for the last text they had read or written, most students gave titles of texts that their professors had assigned to read or write the previous semester. There were only two students who said to have read or written texts different from teacher-assigned ones.

Students were also asked about their biggest fear when writing, in order to determine if fear was a big concern they still have at this level, and to find alternatives to help them overcome such fear. One student mentioned that his biggest fear appeared at the time he was about to start writing, and when he had to organize his ideas. Other

students mentioned the making of mistakes in form and content, the lack of coherence, lack of vocabulary, and the inability to put ideas on paper as their biggest fears. These students' concerns meant not only that there was a lot to be done in class, but also that they knew what they needed to improve on. The *how* was probably what they wanted help with, and that was exactly what we did during the course.

The last two questions were related to their vocation and plans for the future in order to know how far they wanted to get. When asked about their career choice, or why they had decided to study this major, most of them said it was their love for English; some of them love teaching or have come to loving teaching as they advance in their teaching career and get more in contact with students. Another student expressed her idea of becoming a teacher and a researcher, and a few did not provide any answer. Future career plans had to do with their career choice and included the idea of becoming great teachers, going to graduate school and being successful professionals. The final survey had 4 open-ended and 2 closed-ended questions about students' final perceptions of the course. Because of the nature of the course, students could provide additional comments to the closed-ended questions as well. Figure # 2 illustrates the answers provided to the closed-ended questions.

Figure 2 – Learning goals



Most students agreed that they had met the learning goals set at the beginning of the course and that this course had helped them become better readers and writers. They mentioned the following reasons for this:

- This course helped me to know the importance of planning and revision.
- The tools and strategies provided were helpful to improve reading, writing and language itself.
- I learned lots of tips for writing.

- I realized I could write much more than I thought.
- Instructions were always clear.
- I improved my pronunciation and reading aloud. I learned more than I had anticipated.
- It was very difficult for me at the beginning, but I improved.
- My process was in constant progress.
- It helped me as a student and future teacher.
- The goals set at the beginning were met.
- It helped me to get back to books. I can read better now. Now I feel encouraged to read.
- The readings helped my writing and speaking. I improved pronunciation and gained vocabulary.
- I learned tons, but I still have a lot to learn. I am not a good reader, but this course helped me to improve.

Students' reactions were positive and they stated they had met their goals. Of course, some admitted that it was challenging for them to keep up with class pace, but at the end they reached high. On the other hand, there were two students who stated that they had somehow met their goals because they had improved certain aspects regarding reading and writing. However, there was one student who mentioned that he did not meet the course goals because of his own limitations; nonetheless, he considers that he made some improvement. Moreover, students mentioned how much this class helped them to improve and realized all the work that is still ahead of them regarding reading and writing. Some common trends in the students' answers is the awareness created during the course, the change in perceptions, and the possibility to see themselves as readers and writers.

The open-ended questions gave students the chance to describe their favorite and least favorite reading and writing activities and to express how their perceptions about these two skills had changed after taking this course. Although some complained about reading long texts at the beginning, some of the readings they enjoyed the most were the books and the activities done while and after reading these books. Some others enjoyed the poems, the reading, writing and pronunciation games and the final writing activity. Most students liked all the activities, but there were a few students who mentioned they did not like the accuracy exercises, for example, where I corrected everything, but they preferred fluency activities where grammar was not corrected. At the end, it is meaningful to realize that there was a variety of activities to reach different learning styles.

Most students' perceptions about reading and writing changed significantly, as expressed by some of the students:

- At the beginning I was very lazy to read and I really hated writing, but in this course I learned to enjoy these kinds of activities.
- I make fewer mistakes now – I enjoy writing.

- My pronunciation improved and it makes me like reading aloud.
- This course was useful.
- I gained more confidence.
- Now it is easier for me to recognize the main idea when reading, and to organize my ideas when writing.
- The strategies used in this class allowed me to have a better understanding of the writing process.
- Before I used to think that I wrote really bad, now I feel that my writing is better.
- My perceptions changed because now I know ways to improve my own writing.

Some of the common trends in the answers provided by students were the possibility to improve during the process and to gain confidence as to continue improving in the future.

## Conclusions

Teaching is rewarding, but even more when we go back to our teaching notes and analyze what went right and what must be improved next time. A reflective teacher is not likely to make the same mistake twice and will, in fact, be able to help her learners much more each time. This study allowed me to reach the goals set. It was also the beginning of a longer, recurrent research and of many reflective steps that I am to walk in my teaching career.

After having considered all the events that took place along this course and read and reread my students' answers to the questionnaires and oral interview, I feel that considerable learning took place in the classroom and that the ideas that I conveyed and the strategies used worked up to the point of trying to engage students in the reading and writing process, while persuading them to walk my walk. But as Mother Teresa of Calcutta's poem recites: *You will teach them to fly, but they won't fly your flight. You will teach them to dream, but they won't dream your dreams...But you will know that every time they fly, dream, live, and think...You will be in them, the seed of a road thought and learned.* To sum up, it is essential to mention that despite the difficulties I may have anticipated at the beginning of the course, there was a good learning environment, mostly because of students' positive attitudes toward the class and willingness to accept my feedback and guidance. Students acknowledged that this class helped them improve their processes, change their attitudes and perceptions, value their background knowledge, and trust themselves in their effort to become better readers and writers.

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## **Annex I**

### **Initial Survey**

**Dear student,**

**This is a questionnaire to find out about your reading and writing practices in English. I will appreciate your helping me with this survey. All the information will serve to adapt my teaching to your learning style.**

#### **Questions on reading**

1. Do you like reading?
2. What kinds of texts do you to read?
3. Where do you read them?
4. Mention the last book, article, poem, or piece of writing you read?
5. Do you read outside the English class?
6. Which reading techniques do you use when reading?
7. How do you process information while reading? Circle the option that corresponds to your own case.
  - a) I translate from English into Spanish
  - b) I process information in the target language

#### **Questions on writing**

1. Do you like writing?
2. What kinds of texts do you write?
3. Where do you write them?
4. Mention the last piece of writing you wrote?



5. Do you write outside the English class?
6. What is your biggest fear when writing?
7. How do you process information while writing? Circle the option that corresponds to your own case.
  - a) I translate from Spanish into English
  - b) I process information in the target language

### **Questions on reading and writing**

1. Are your reading and writing skills equally developed? Or have you developed one faster than the other?
2. Do you consider reading and writing important for your future career?
3. Why did you decide to study a B.A. in English?
4. Do you currently work?    Yes \_\_\_\_\_    No \_\_\_\_\_  
 Where? Kindergarten \_\_\_\_\_    Elementary School \_\_\_\_\_  
 Secondary School \_\_\_\_\_    Institute \_\_\_\_\_    University \_\_\_\_\_  
 Do you work...? a) Full time \_\_\_\_\_    b) Part-time \_\_\_\_\_    c) # \_\_\_\_\_ hours
5. What do you plan to do once you graduate?
6. Write any additional comments that you consider are important to mention about your reading and writing process in English

*Thank you*

## Annex II Final Survey

**Dear student,**

**Please answer this questionnaire to provide feedback on this course so as to assess your learning process and improve my teaching practice in future courses.**

1. Did you meet your learning goals? Why or why not?
2. Mention your favorite reading and writing activities during this course. Why were they your favorite?
3. Mention your least favorite reading and writing activities during this course. Why were they your least favorite?
4. How did your perceptions of reading and writing change after taking this course?
5. Do you consider that this course helped you in the process of becoming a better reader and writer? How?
6. Do you have any additional comments about your course experience? Which one(s)?

*Thank you*

### Annex III

#### Editing Symbols

Symbol	Meaning
????	meaning unclear
A	article usage
Awk	Awkward
Cap	Capitalization
Choppy	choppy writing
Comb	combine and connect to make one sentence
Conj	Conjunction
Frag	Fragment
Miss	missing word
Nfs	needs further support
P	Punctuation
	not parallel
Prep	Preposition
pron agr	pronoun agreement
Ro	run-on or run-together sentence
Sp	spelling
s/pl	singular or plural
Sva	subject-verb agreement
Trans	add a transition
Vi	verb inflection
vt	verb tense
Wdy	wordy, too many unnecessary words
Wf	word form
Wo	word order
Wch	word choice
Ww	wrong word
Exw	extra word
Pr ag	pronoun agreement

### Referencia

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