

The Effects of Different Pre-Writing Strategies on Iranian EFL Writing Achievement

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating whether applying pre-writing strategies would affect the quality of L2 learners' compositions. Twenty three adult EFL students from Jihad-e-Daneshgahi English centre in Iran participated in this study. They were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups, including 11 and 12 participants in each. They were at the advanced proficiency level. Each student wrote five argumentative essays. Students in experimental group were treated to perform three pre-writing activities alternatively (concept map, reading relevant texts, and negotiation). The findings revealed that students wrote better compositions as a result of applying pre-writing strategies. Significant differences in two groups indicated that pre-writing activities had significant effect on the participants' writing achievement. The findings may have implications for English learners, English teachers and material developers.

Keywords: Concept mapping, Negotiation, Learning strategies, Pre-writing strategies

1. Introduction

Writing is more than a means to create a document; it can be a method to discover topics and explore ideas. Pre-writing refers to practice or experimental writing—writing that helps you get started and measure what you know, identify new ideas, and indicate areas requiring further research. It is a way of putting critical thinking into action. Pre-writing can help sharpen the skills of observation and evaluation. Like an artist making quick sketches before beginning a mural, students can test ideas, explore a range of topics, list ideas, and get a feel for their subject. Pre-writing can help them save time by quickly determining which ideas are worth developing. The purpose of the present study is; therefore, to explore the effects of new teaching strategies, namely, the application of concept mapping, reading relevant texts and negotiation alternatively. A study by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) suggested that successful L2/FL learners are aware of the learning strategies they use and why they use them. The matter of interest in this paper is to investigate the effect of the explicit teaching of the pre-writing strategies on L2 learners' writing improvement. The question is whether English language teachers can help students improve their self-control and attention in writing by the explicit instruction of learning strategies like alternate inclusion of concept mapping, reading relevant texts, and negotiation.

2. Literature Review

Hayes and Flower (1980, p.40) conceptualized writing as a “strategic action where writers employ strategies to juggle with the constraints of composing”. They stated that composing strategies are decisions taken to cope with the problems. Hays and Flower (1980) presented a model of skilled writers in which cognitive processes formed a major component. These included three basic processes: planning what to say and how to say it; translating plans into written text; and reviewing to improve the text.

Literature reports on the benefits of concept mapping for organizing information, assessing in learning, comprehension of particularly complex communications, refining literacy framework, and successful understanding of the text (Ruddell & Boyle, 1989). A concept map, as a learning strategy, is defined as a visual representation of an individual's knowledge structure on a particular topic as constructed by the individual (Zimmaro & Cawley, 1998).

Concept maps represent the relationships among concepts (Novak, 1981). With the visual representation of key words, students can identify main issues of a text and organize these key issues in a meaningful way. Research reports that concept mapping has positive effects on academic writing (Zipprich, 1995; Peresich, Meadows, & Sinatra, 1990). Strategies such as concept mapping help students attend to task, focus on important textures, and organize materials.

Speaking activities like pre-writing discussions are popular in ESL writing classes. Little, however, is known about whether talking prior to writing affects the quality of ESL students' compositions. Nor it is clear how peers and teacher led discussions affect students' writing. The few studies that examined the effect of pre-writing discussions have all suggested students write better after talking about a topic (Bossio, 1993; Kennedy, 1983; Meyer, 1980; Reff, 1966; Sweigart, 1991; Vinson, 1980). However, none of these studies have tried to establish clearly how teacher-student or student-student interactions actually assist students' writing. Inspired by this pedagogical need, Bossio 1993 examined L2 peer and teacher-led prewriting discussions, comparing these two circumstances to situations where students had no discussions before drafting their essays.

Reading and writing are two points in dialectic of meaning- making with text. Readers read writing; writers write reading. There are many connections between the two processes, some simple and easily visible, others complex and highly theoretical. Most of the readers use writing to help them process what they read. Writers are always reading. In addition to reading what others have written-for ideas, for information, for a sense of genre or audience-they also read their own work, over and over, as they revise (Paterson, 2000). An examination of the literature reveals a wide range of terminology associated with learner training, which is also referred to as strategy teaching or strategies-based instruction (SBI) (Brown, 2000).

The area of interest is to know whether explicit instruction of learning strategies, namely alternate inclusion of concept mapping, Reading, and negotiation can lead to an increase in students' writing achievement.

3. Statement of the problem

Writing is less preferred as a language skill, which may call for relatively longer time to be well-developed. In addition, the absence of communicative purposes in the design and demand of curriculum might also lead to learners' frustration and antipathy, as learners' individual needs for English are hardly acknowledged. Currently, writing as an important component in EFL is not given enough attention by both learners and teachers in some institutions in Iran. The researcher is going to have a kind of preparation in the writing classes to involve the students in the strategy. Students do not enjoy writing classes and classes are boring for them so motivating them is not an easy job. The assumption underlying these difficulties is that the majority of the Iranian English students are not even aware of these strategies.

4. Research question

The specific research question was addressed in this study:

Does the alternate inclusion of concept mapping, reading relevant texts, and negotiation of topics as pre-writing strategies result in improvement of Iranian EFL learners' writing achievement?

5. Method

5.1 Participants

40 L2 learners participated in this study. They were studying English in jahad-e-Daneshgahi English centre in Isfahan, Iran. The Oxford Placement Test (2004) of English Language Proficiency was administered to determine their level of English proficiency. Twenty three adult EFL students whose scores were between 150 and 169 in OPT test were selected for this study as advanced students. Most of the students were students of the university and some of them graduated from universities in Iran. They were male and female students. Their age range varied from 19 to 35. They were all native speakers of Persian. Their experience in writing was limited to their course books focusing on essay writing. Then the participants were assigned into two control and experimental groups randomly. In the experimental group, there were eleven students and in the control group, there were twelve students.

5.2 Instruments

For the purpose of data collection, different instruments were employed in this study. They are as follows:

5.2.1 Oxford placement Test (Opt)

An Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to 40 students in order to select advanced students. There were 200 questions; 100 listening and 100 grammar questions that each one has one score.

5.2.2 Reading Texts

The topics for pre-writing activities have been taken from 'For and against', L.G. Alexander 1977(see Appendix A for the texts). It is an oral practice book for advanced students of English. This book was prepared for adult students who are attending classes mainly to improve their command of spoken English. Therefore, the texts were as activities given before writing that learners should develop. The topics selected were mainly general topics which were controversial and familiar for the students.

5.2.3 Writing assessment check list

The researcher used Roebuck's Analytic scoring Rubrics, modified by Maftoon & Rabiee (2006) as a writing assessment check list. The reason why this assessment check list was chosen was the simple separation of scores that has four components, mechanism, vocabulary, grammar, and organization. Each part has 5 scores, (5 means no errors, 4 means 1 to three errors, 3 means 4 to 6 errors, 2 means 7 to 9 errors, and finally 1 means 10 and over errors) that totally, each student has 20 marks.

5.2.4 Writing source Book

The book "Writing with confidence", by Alan Meyers was used in this project. This book is reader-friendly as well as comprehensive and teaches writing compositions from paragraph writing to essay writing and different types of essays such as; expository, argumentative and so on. In addition, students were comfortable with this book because they had a lot of exercises after each task in the book.

5.2.5 Reliability Formula

In order to measure the correlation between two scores in five writing tests, the Cranach alpha reliability formula was estimated. In all of the 5- paired samples correlation was more than 0.7 that indicates high and positive correlation between two scores for each student in five tests.

5.3 Procedure

A sample of 23 advanced students whose scores were between 150 and 169 in OPT test were chosen as participants in this research. The twelve-week study consisted of four phases: 1) pre-treatment instruction 2) pre testing 3) Strategy instruction 4) Post testing, the details will be presented in the following sections on practicing the strategy for the students to master the fundamental skills. The procedure consisted of a pre-treatment instruction for 5 sessions, one session for pre-test, then 18 sessions on strategy instruction, and finally one session for post-test.

In the first five sessions, students in two groups learned how to write an essay following argumentative genre in four paragraphs; one introduction, two bodies, one for pros and one for cons, and finally a conclusion. . Learners were asked to write an essay of 250 words, about the topic assigned to them. Then everything about thesis statement, transitional words, controlling ideas, bodies (for& against), and conclusion was taught to them. Also, their knowledge about capitalization, punctuation, indentation, margin, unity, coherence and so on was checked.

After that, on the sixth session, writing pre-test was administered to ensure about the homogeneity of participants regarding their writing ability. One topic was assigned to two groups. The topic was 'Cheating can help students learn'. For the next 18 sessions, the groups had different procedures. During 18 sessions of treatment, experimental group had three writing tests according to three different strategies, one test after each treatment. The topics were: 1-any form of education other than co-education is simply unthinkable, 2- Books, plays and films should be censored, and 3- The younger generation knows best. The essays were corrected two times by the teacher and returned to the students. The teacher was a non-native English teacher for all groups who taught English for 10 years and especially two years in writing courses at Jihad-e- Daneshgahi English institute in Isfahan Iran.

5.3.1 The control group procedure

Group1, the control group, started writing about a topic each six session without any treatment. They were asked to write each topic without any speaking or communicating ideas. In this traditional way of writing, the questions were not answered and the students had to do their assignment themselves. After the writing assignment, the papers were collected.

5.3.2 The CRN group procedure

In experimental group as the first treatment, the researcher introduced a topic and learners thought about any kind of concept that was related to the topic in 5 sessions, and then drew a map out of the concepts. The same session students read their concept maps and the researcher dragged any subject that was not related. Students were provided with handouts that included an instruction to concept mapping, a list of characteristics of concept maps, and examples of well- constructed and poorly constructed concept maps. Students practiced using concept map

strategy in writing essays. Some of the exercises required students to create a graphic representation of a given topic of their own, where as some other exercises demanded them to fill in the blanks –missing concepts of an incomplete concept map graph. The teacher modelled the use of telegraphic language forms and explained that this involves choosing the most important information. Students assisted by generating ideas to be placed on the map. Then the teacher discussed how the categories and the details could be sequence into sentences, and sentences within paragraphs, to compose an essay. Finally on 12th session participants were required to write an essay based on concept mapping.

As the second treatment, the researcher practiced on the reading skills, (e.g. skimming, scanning, and note taking). To achieve this goal, some passages were prepared for the students to read and take notes. The students should have finished reading in 30 minutes. After reading, skimming was a great way to review material they had read before. Then the students were asked to circle the number of the statement that they thought best expressed the main idea of the reading. The main goal for the researcher was to understand how the students observed applying the points which had read them before. The students could use ideas from the article and from their own experiences. Participants were required to write an essay after reading a passage about that topic content on 18th session.

As the third treatment, instructor asked students to discuss in the class. Some of the students had problems in comprehending and speaking English in the class, so the researcher tried to encourage them to take part in class discussions. The teacher wrote one topic on the board and asked students' view points. While students were talking, the teacher wrote the ideas on the board in two -for and against- columns. Because the topics were controversial ones, students started talking about their ideas. Students were required to write an argumentative essay after negotiating the subject among the students and the teacher on 24th session. At the end of each test, the students' writings were gathered and were corrected holistically by the researcher. The students' problems were discussed on the next session.

At the end of the semester, a post-test was administered. Post-test title was, "Grew fat and be happy". The treatment for control group was based on traditional writing method. The treatment for experimental groups was based on three pre-writing strategies; concept mapping, reading relevant texts, and negotiation of the topic. All of the writing assignments were collected to be analyzed analytically, based on Roebucks' analytic scoring Rubric. Their scores on the pre-test, post-test and their writing were recorded for later evaluation by SPSS. The results were checked holistically to see if the different strategies of pre-writing would improve the students' writings achievement.

6. Results

All of the writing will be collected to be analyzed analytically, based on Roebucks' analytic scoring Rubric, in which four parts will be examined, vocabulary, grammar, organization and mechanics. The results will be checked to see if the different methods of pre-writing will improve the writing achievement.

6.1 The result of the Analysis of screening tests

The results of the analysis of writing pre-test and post-tests are presented in the following section:

Null Hypothesis: Focusing on alternative use of relevant texts, concept map, and negotiation of topics has no significant effect on the Iranian EFL students, overall writing achievement.

6.1.1 The results of the analysis of the writing pre-test

Table 1 shows the means of the five groups, one control group and five experimental groups. The mean scores of the OPT test are very close to each other, meaning that their English proficiency level is almost the same. The result indicates that the level of significance is more than .05, therefore; the proficiency level of the writing ability of the two groups is not significantly different, $t(20.999) = 0.703$, $P = .490$.

Table 2 indicates that the level of significance is 0.392, more than .05, therefore; there is no significant difference among the five groups in writing proficiency. The proficiency level of the writing ability of the five groups is not significantly different.

6.1.2 The results of the Analysis of the writing post-test

Table 3 shows the mean scores of the control group and CRN group, which are 11.55 and 13.83 respectively. The results of the analysis of the writing post-tests (control and CRN) are presented in the following sections.

The results of the Table 4 indicates that the level of significance is 0.000, less than .05, therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the difference between the students' achievement in the two groups is significant, $t(21) = 5.308$, $p = .000$. The results indicates that the level of significance is less than .05 therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and the difference between the students' achievement in the two groups is significant, $t(21) = 5.308$, $p = .000$. It indicates that the two groups' –control and CRN – achievement on writing is significantly different. Therefore the

treatment is effective in each test separately.

7. Discussion

According to the findings, the answer to the research question, “Does the alternative use of relevant texts, negotiation of topics and concept map as pre-writing tasks result in improvement of Iranian EFL learners' writing achievements?”, is “yes” and the null hypothesis, “Focusing on alternative inclusion of relevant texts, concept map, and negotiation of topics has no significant effect on the Iranian EFL students' overall writing achievement” is, therefore, rejected.

The ultimate goal of the present study was to investigate the effect of the explicit instruction of pre-writing strategies in writing argumentative essays on EFL advanced students' writing achievement. The results showed a significant effect of the explicit instruction of the pre-writing strategies on the students' writing achievement. The results are consistent with the findings of Talebinezhad (2009). Moreover, it confirms the findings of Hofer et al. (1998) that organizational strategies, such as outlining content or relating concepts within content, are among the cognitive learning strategies that individuals use to write better. One explanation might be that, as Barnhardt (1997) stated, there is a relationship between strategy use and improvement in language learning. For students who had long have difficulties in writing a foreign language, a positive change in learning due to their success in the application of the prewriting strategies might be the initial step toward improved essay writing. It meant that when the students had a better idea of how to go about a writing task, they were more positive about the task. In other words, pre-writing strategies helped students attend to writing tasks, and control their learning more effectively. This created a much more tangible evidence of the quality of both the learning process and concept understanding.

Another explanation may be that the construction of pre-writing activities might have helped students to build more complex cognitive structures in regard to information which was vital for writing. According to Pintrich (2000), the cognitive area of improvement begins with goal setting, prior knowledge activation and planning. He places the actual use of cognitive strategies in the phase of cognitive control. Butler states that by strategy intervention it is easier to demonstrate the different types of knowledge which are essential for fostering students' intelligence use.

The best explanation for this result is the theory of multiple intelligences. This theory provides a way of understanding intelligence which teachers can use as a guide to develop classroom activities and to address multiple ways of learning and knowing (Gardner, 1999). Teaching strategies informed by multiple-intelligence theory can transfer some control from teachers to learners by giving students choices in the ways they will learn and demonstrate their leaning. By focusing on problem-solving activities that draw on multiple intelligences, these teaching strategies encourage learners to build on existing strengths and knowledge (Kallenbach, 1999).

8. Conclusions

The findings clearly demonstrate that the instruction of the pre-writing strategies can benefit EFL students at the advanced level of language proficiency. In fact, the benefits of concept mapping, reading, and negotiation might extend writing achievement. It seems that the use of prewriting strategies in our courses of writing in the university has been rewarding as a means of constructing knowledge and promoting writing. This has important implications for both students and teachers. Students maximize their learning by using concept mapping, reading relevant text, and negotiation of the topic in their essay writing; hence they feel more independent and feel more responsibility for their own learning. Because these prewriting activities are easily adopted by the students, teachers may enhance their students' writing skill by familiarizing them with the concept mapping, reading, and negotiation as prewriting strategies.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the pre-test scores of writing

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control group	11	10.55	0.934	0.282	9.92	11.17	9	12
Concept map	11	10.64	0.674	0.203	10.18	11.09	10	12
Reading	12	10.75	0.866	0.250	10.20	11.30	9	12
Negotiation	12	10.08	1.311	0.379	9.25	10.92	8	12
conc-read-nego	12	10.83	1.030	0.297	10.18	11.49	9	12
Total	58	10.57	0.993	0.130	10.31	10.83	8	12

Table 2. Results of one way ANOVAs for pre-test of writing

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.118	4	1.030	1.047	0.392
Within Groups	52.106	53	0.983		
Total	56.224	57			

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Performance on Writing Post-test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
post test	control group	11	11.55	1.128	.340
	con-read-neg	12	13.83	.937	.271

Table 4. The results of the t-test for the Writing Post-test Total

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
post test	Equal variances assumed	0.284	0.600	-5.308	21	0.000	-2.288	0.431	-3.184	-1.391	
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.264	19.546	0.000	-2.288	0.435	-3.196	-1.380	