



**Investigating the Effect of the Amount of Familiarity with Web on
Iranian EFL Students' Source-Based Writing**

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DEDICATION

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List of Abbreviations

abbreviation	Full form
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
WWW	World Wide Web
WWWQ	World Wide Web Questionnaire
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language

Abstract

The World Wide Web becomes very popular recently and plays an influential role in English learning. By burgeoning role of source-based writing as partial fulfillment of TEFL courses and vast use of the Internet, lack of empirical studies to explore these areas is obvious. This study aimed to explore the effect of the amount of familiarity with the Web (Internet literacy) on junior English students' source-based writing while using the Internet sources. Further, the relations between English proficiency, writing competence, and reading comprehension were investigated. Moreover, correlation between source-based writing and independent writing tasks was calculated. Thirty five university students majoring English literature from Kurdistan University were required to compose a source-based writing using three hypertext resources from the Web. It was revealed that those who had had higher Internet literacy wrote better sourced-based writings. Also, significant correlations between reading comprehension, writing competence, and English proficiency were obtained. Moreover, the results revealed that students' performances on source-based writing and independent writing were not related.

Key words: Internet literacy, Source-based writing, Hypertext.

Chapter One

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the ground for setting into motion this research. In this chapter, the topic under investigation is introduced. Next, statement of the problem and significance of the study are discussed. Research assumptions, questions and hypotheses are followed by the definition of key terms. Finally, the outline of the study is presented.

1.1. General Overview

Discourse synthesis refers to the process of integrating ideas and information from multiple resources to create essays or reports. Spivey (1984) defined it as a process in which readers/writers read multiple texts on a topic and synthesize them to create new texts. Moreover, in discourse synthesis, readers (writers) organize, select, and connect their ideas from source texts and previous knowledge as they compose and integrate their own reports (Spivey, 1991).

From Spivey's definition, it is obvious that discourse synthesis process contains three main stages. *Organizing* is the mental and physical structuring of a text (Wolfersberger, 2008). When making sense of a text, readers create a representation of the text's meaning that has logical and organized links between the idea units (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978).

Selecting is the unconscious ranking of textual information in a hierarchy of importance relevant to the reader's purposes. Usually, readers perceive information that is foregrounded in the text, or textually relevant, as important and therefore remember it (Cirilo & Foss, 1980). However, when readers come to a text with purposes that are not agreed with the textually relevant information, like when a writing task has caused a particular reading purpose, they can perceive information other than what was foregrounded in the text (Pichert & Anderson, 1977).

While writing, considering the textual relevance of a piece of information is one way that writers select information from source texts to include in their writing. A writer may measure the textual relevance of the information within a single text—when writing from a single source text—but may shift to measuring the textual relevance intertextually, when writing from multiple source texts. Spivey et al. (1989) note that writers are more likely to use information that is foregrounded in several texts when composing from multiple sources.

Connecting is the process of integrating background knowledge and selected information from sources. When writing, writers twist sources' content and previous knowledge. Further, as Spivey (1989) notes, writers connect by providing link among related ideas that may have been drawn from multiple sources.

Each writer uses these three options—organizing, selecting, connecting—differently because of individual factors, the writing task, etc.. But, according to Spivey et al. (1989), successful synthesis writing may not be determined as much by how each writer uses these three processes, but it is writer's reading ability that has a determinant role.

After revolution of Cognitivism, research on discourse comprehension and readers' mental representations flourished quickly. Studying the process of reading was the main goal of constructivism. As Spivey (1989, a) stated:

“Constructivism portrays the reader as actively building a mental representation by combining new information from the text with previously acquired knowledge. The reader constructs meaning by *organizing* the context according to the structure of the text or according to another structure generated from a cognitive repertoire, by *selecting* content on the basis of some principles of importance, and by *connecting content through* the making of inferences and elaborations.” (p. 3)

In Constructivist perspective, Organization means organizing both background knowledge and mental representations build from reading the text; Selection means storing important or prominent points of the text; and Connection means making connections in textual content and using background knowledge in order to make inferences.

In the information age, college students and professionals have more and more opportunities to search for information on the Internet and the World Wide Web. As Stapleton (2005) notes, using the World Wide Web (hereafter the 'Web') has become an increasingly viable way to source information in academic writing. The Internet and the Web provide students access to electronic resources online that may be helpful for their writing, such as journals, library catalogs, topical databases, search services, and resources on English language.

Reading on the Internet is unlike traditional reading. Much has been claimed about the prevalence of hypertextual discourse in the Internet and its possible impact on education. Hypertext is the label for computer-driven displays of information that can display information in various combinations (Lohr et al 1996). In hypertext, pieces of information are linked to one another via links. The text is not presented linearly. The reader navigates through the text by clicking on linked words, phrases, or pictures. The text found in the Internet is one example of hypertext, but hypertext

is also utilized on CD-ROM applications and multimedia presentations. In a hypertext environment, information can be connected or linked to any other information contained in that environment. Ross (2004) notes that a hypertext essay in its most rudimentary form is a word-processed document clearly identifiable as an essay –it has the graphemes, paragraph structures, and academic style characteristics typical of any essay—but it can exist and convey reliability without appearing on paper. Hypertext essays contain embedded hyperlinks that serve either as targets to quickly move the reader within the essay or as links to references, found on the Internet. Targets (an intra-paper link) help the reader move quickly through the paper –clicking on a target will move the reader down or up to the linked section of the essay. Works cited reference pages frequently contain hyperlinks to the Internet source. This can be helpful to any reader; the source can be visited or used immediately as the reader interacts with the essay. Further, hypertext essays may contain hyperlinks that could connect the reader to personal Web pages, created by the essay’s author (Ross, 2004).

According to Niederhause and Shapiro (2003), ‘whereas traditional text allows the author to assume certain information has already been encountered, allowing presentation of new information accordingly, hypertext links allow greater flexibility of access to information such that the sequence for reading is specified by each user.’ In the other words, there is a greater degree of learner control when engaged in hypertext assisted learning. In the hypertext, the author can create links for points that is necessary for the reader to know, in order to comprehend what s/he is reading. If the reader does not know the point, so s/he can check the link and read more information about the point. Such a facility is not available in traditional text where the author should decide whether delineate a point or not. Widdowson (1990) notes that, in writing a book, the authors assume that some of the ideas are known by the reader, so those points do not need any delineation. On the other hand, they may

delineate a point because they think the reader's knowledge is not enough to comprehend.

Moreover, the most salient feature of hypertext is its nonlinear structure and flexibility of information access. Another significant feature of the hypertext is its ease of storage and accessibility. They can be maintained and accessed quite differently in comparison with traditional paper documents (Ross, 2004).

It is believed that reading on the Web, using the selected information, and making meaning on texts out of the synthesized results will become modern people's common ways of literacy practices – including communication, meaning-making, and knowledge production—in the near future. Moreover, in order to use the resources on the Web to aid their own language learning, learners have to identify their learning goals, search for information matching their goals, and discern relevant information in the vast amount of Web resources. Such a process is quite similar to the nature of source-based writing --integrating relevant information from other specialists' articles into one's own article to support one's own views (Spivey, 1989).

In some proficiency tests such as IELTS, TEEP, and OTEFL writing from sources is included. Such tests are designed to assess students' ability to cope with language for academic study. It is argued that providing students with texts on which to base their writing ensures that they have something to say and that no student is disadvantaged through lack of information. Weir (1993) believes that, by basing writing tasks on written and/or spoken text supplied to candidates or on non-verbal stimuli, it is possible to ensure that in terms of subject knowledge all start equally, at least in terms of the information available to them.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, such writing replicates the writing that students are expected to undertake in their academic studies outside the language

classroom. Successful academic writing involves, among other things, the ability to integrate information from previous research in relevant areas of study. Even the most original academic papers integrate facts, ideas, concepts, and theories from other sources by means of quotations, paraphrases, summaries, and brief references.

As Read (1990) states, providing test-takers with content material on which to base their writing may help reduce the effects of differences in background knowledge among test-takers and, when the writing tasks are linked with earlier reading and listening tasks, may represent a better simulation of the process of academic study than simply giving a stand-alone writing test.

Writing on sources is an academic task that students across a wide range of disciplines are required to accomplish. It involves skills which students need to master if they are to be accepted into an academic community. Yet it is a task that needs to be more accurately described and fully understood if it is to be valid not only in terms of face and content validity but also in terms of construct and predictive validity.

Because of close connection between reading and writing skills and their use in academic writing tasks, there has been considerable interest in the reading-writing relationship (see, for example, Esterhold 1990, Tierney & Shanahan 1989).

Eisterhold (1990) indicated three models of reading-writing relation: 1) “the directional model” hypothesizes that reading and writing share structural similarities so that the structure of whatever is acquired in one skill can then be applied in the other. For example, ‘being able to recognize a rhetorical pattern such as comparison and contrast in a reading passage would presumably allow the reader to eventually reproduce that pattern in writing.’ 2) “The non-directional model” assumes that reading and writing drive from a single underlying cognitive proficiency and that improvement in one will cause improvement in the other. Shanklin (1982) claims

that, if reading and writing are both constructive processes constrained by same underlying competence, then they must be related. Further, Shanahan (1984) notes that 'if reading and writing involve analogous cognitive structures and processes, it is possible that instruction in one would lead to increased ability in the other.' Since there is a single cognitive proficiency underlying both reading and writing, improvement in one domain will result in improvement in the other. 3) 'The bi-directional model' claims that reading and writing are not only interactive but also interdependent.

There has also been much research into the writing process both in the L1 and L2. But little is known about how successful writers integrate sources into their own writing or the difficulties that non-native speakers encounter in dealing with such tasks. Those studies which have dealt with the synthesis of information from sources mostly have focused on writing a summary from a single source (e.g. Taylor 1984).

One notable exception to this is the study by Campbell (1990) who compared the way in which native and non-native speaker students used a background reading text to write an academic essay. She found that although both groups have shown an ability to use the source text appropriately, that is to quote from it, paraphrase, summarize and explain it in their own writing, they still relied heavily on copying, not only in the appropriate form quoting from the text, but also in the inappropriate forms of exact or near copies from it. She also found that both groups frequently failed to reference the text and used it more frequently to foreground information, that is, to make a point rather than to support their own content.

It is, thus, worthwhile to examine how college students go through the process and what pedagogical implications such explorations may provide. However, there is not much done on source-based second language writing, based on our review of the literature. Moreover, hypertext reading and writing, and using electronic sources on

the Web still remain unexplored in the foreign language learning/teaching areas, including Teaching-English-as-a-Foreign-Language. Using electronic sources on the Web is not explored while most of students and researchers, because of some limitations in finding sourcebooks, problems of searching among content of paper books, and lack of new and update materials and sources in our country, prefer to and do use of online articles, e-books, and on-line journals. All of the things which were mentioned above raise some questions in a suspicious mind.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Although most of Iranian EFL students have to write academic papers as a partial fulfillment of their courses, almost no reliable study has been done exploring variables which may affect the quality of source-based writing. Moreover, using information on the Web has become quite popular for teaching and learning English in the ESL and EFL contexts. However, hypertext reading and writing and using electronic sources on the Web still remain unexplored in the TEFL field. Due to the lack of empirical studies about using reading materials on the Web to write academic papers, this project will be conducted to explore the relationship between Web experience and discourse synthesis (writing-from-sources) performance.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Writing term-papers is one of common prerequisites that EFL students should perform for most of their courses. In writing these papers students read different sources and use them to support their ideas. In addition, as using the Internet articles as a source is very common, factors such as amount of the Web experience may affect the quality of their papers. This study is supposed to be convenient enough to yield the effect of factors such as amount of web experience on students' source-

based writing. The researcher hopes that the outcomes of the study would be applicable to and useful for the instructors of the field TEFL.

1.4. Research Assumptions

For launching this research, it is assumed that:

1. Students' hypertext reading comprehension may affect their writing performance.
2. The quality of sources may have no effect on their source-based writing.

1.5. Research Question

This study addressed the following question:

- I. Does students' previous Web experiences may have an impact on their source-based writing performance?

1.6. Research Hypothesis

- Students' previous Web experiences have no impact on their source-based writing performance.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

Several limitations in this study need to be acknowledged. One limitation of present study is the small sample number. Similar to the other quantitative studies, the study is limited to a small number of informants. Unfortunately, most of requests for cooperation were turned down.