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Subject:

**The Impact of Semantic Mapping and Brainstorming
Strategies on EFL Learners' Writing Ability**

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

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Abstract

This study was an empirical attempt to investigate whether amalgamation of semantic mapping and brainstorming strategies had any significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability. The participants of this study were all at intermediate level of language proficiency. However, to ensure the participants' homogeneity, a piloted mock PET, was administered to 90 intermediate students from whom 60 were chosen for the study. The researcher administered writing at the beginning to make sure that the two groups were homogeneous regarding writing proficiency. As this study was an experimental study, the 60 subjects were then divided into two groups of experimental and control. Each group was instructed for a three_ month semester, (nine session treatment). They received the same instruction in all the language skills and components except for the writing part. The only difference was that the experimental group was taught through semantic mapping and brainstorming techniques, while the students in the control group did not receive any strategy. At the end of the treatment, the writing post test was administered to reveal any possible difference between the two groups in terms of their writing ability. The data were analyzed via an independent samples *t*-test to evaluate the difference between the experimental and control group mean scores, which turned out to be significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis of the study was rejected and it was found that the treatment was effective.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

1.1. Introduction

The field of second language (L2) writing has raised theoretical concerns about how students improve writing skills. While some authors have looked into *process writing* as the optimum way to improve the skill (Roca de Larios, Murphy & Marin, 2002; Scott, 1996; Susser, 1994; Zamel, 1983), and other studies present writing as a “recursive, nonlinear cognitive process in which the writer moves back and forth between prewriting, writing, revising, and editing until he/she is satisfied with his/her creation” (Flower and Hayes, 1981). Most students receive minimal or no instruction in learning how to write. Ruiz-Funes (1999) states that writing involves persuading someone else that they are in possession of certain ideas, knowledge, facts, or feelings about something in seeking to express these ideas, facts, etc. clearly.

A person should find new associations between them by selecting words and putting them together in a written and printed form.

A person can convey the meaning of these associations (Fairbarin & Winch, 1996). The feedback students receive on the product they give for correction and grading is often incomprehensible to them, and no one really leads them through the process of generating ideas, organizing them into a coherent sequence, and putting them on paper (Cohen & Macaro, 2007). It is only recently, however, that research into writing has offered thought-provoking ideas about what good writers do, ideas which hold implications for teachers who wish to help their students to become good writers. In the absence of a well established or widely recognized model of writing, teachers tend to have very varying ideas about the role of writing in the classroom, what writing involves, and the possible roles of teachers and students in developing writing activities.

Among the four major language skills, creating a coherent and extended piece of writing has always been considered the most difficult task to do in a

language. Writing is a skill that even most native speakers of a language can hardly master. Learning to write in either the first or the second language is one of the most difficult tasks a learner encounters, and one that few people can be said would fully master (Rivers, 1968). Nunan (1989) remarks, “it has been argued that learning to write frequently and expressively is the most difficult of the motor skills for all language users regardless of whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign language” (p. 35).

Foreign language learners, especially those who want to continue their education in academic environments, usually find writing a highly difficult and challenging task. The difficulty lies in different areas including generating and organizing ideas and in translating those ideas into readable texts. The skills involved in writing are highly complex. L2 writers have to pay attention to higher and lower level skills to improve their writing ability. With so many conflicting theories around and so many implementation factors to consider, planning a teaching course can be a daunting task (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

White and Arndt (1991) explained that semantic mapping is a strategy for graphically representing concepts. Semantic maps portray the schematic relations that compose a concept. It assumes that there are multiple relations between a concept and the knowledge that is associated with the concept (p. 21). Williams (1994) once said that semantic mapping enables students not only to visualize relationships, but to categorize them as well. As a direct teaching strategy that includes brainstorming and teacher-led discussions, it provides opportunities for schema development and enhancement, as well as prediction, hypothesizing and verification of content when used as a pre-writing activity. To achieve this end, choosing an appropriate approach to teaching writing is decisive in teaching writing strategies. Examining different approaches to teaching writing in different studies carried out by different researchers

(Calkins, 1986; Elliott, 2005; Gebhard, 2006; Gocsik, 2004; Hedge, 2000; Meyers, 2006; Proet, 1986; Raimes, 1983;) reveals that process approach to teaching writing skill lends itself more to teaching a wider range of writing strategies. As Calkins (1986) states, “when we understand the writing process, we can help each of our students invent, use, and adapt effective writing strategies” (p. 16). Furthermore, Chen and Robbins (1987) maintain that, “The study of writing strategies should be viewed within a wider research movement known as ‘process writing’, which emerged in the field of native language (L1) writing with the aim of gaining insights into the mental actions writers engage in while composing” (pp. 221-236).

Over the years, different approaches have been adopted for teaching and assessing writing (Raimes, 1991). Traditionally, writing was viewed as transcribed speech. It was often assumed that the acquisition of spoken language was sufficient for, and had to take precedence over the learning of written language. Therefore teachers mostly avoided introducing writing early in the process of language learning because they believed that the difference between pronunciation and spelling would interfere with the proper learning of speech (Silva & Matsuda, 2002).

Later, particularly after mid 1970s, understanding the need of language learners for producing longer pieces of written language led scholars to realize that there was more to writing than constructing well-formed grammatical sentences. This realization led to the development of the paragraph-pattern approach (Raimes, 1991), which emphasized the importance of organization at extra sentential levels. The major concern of this approach was the logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms, especially to create different forms of essays. This was also a product-oriented approach in which learners were required to focus their attention on forms or final products (Silva &

Matsuda, 2002). The assessment in this approach was based on how well learners would be able to create error-free final products.

Raimes (1998) mentions that compared to other skills, there is even more anxiety involved in writing, especially when many teachers themselves do not feel entirely comfortable in writing English, even if it is their native language.

Unfortunately, the pure form of the process approach has not won widespread acceptance in the academic environment although many instructors have adapted some of its features in their teaching methodology. In academic contexts, the concern in most fields of study is that a learner should be able to perform academic writing tasks which satisfy the academic community, such as essay exams. These have little to do with a process orientation (Weir, 1993).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies and educational reports have pointed out that solitary models of traditional teaching methods tend to make students overly passive and indifferent to what is being taught (Liang, 1996; wei, 1997).

The best of the researcher's knowledge in Iran and especially in Lorestan province teaching writing is one of the important problems for teachers and students. In Lorestan the teachers mostly use traditional method and they seldom make use of learning strategies.

The problem under discussion was raised on the one hand from many difficulties students encounter when attempting to write from the very beginning of their attempts to generate ideas and organize them into a coherent sequence, until they finish it and translate their ideas into readable texts, and on the other, from the results of many studies which emphasize teaching of writing strategies to help students write effectively.

Some researchers as Bowen & Cali (2003) suggested that instructional strategies that teach students to practice cognitive skills can increase learners' performance in academic subjects. Brainstorming can be another effective way to generate lots of ideas on a specific issue and then determine which idea is the best solution. The principal aim of this study was to teach EFL learners how to use semantic mapping and to investigate the effect of this strategy accompanied by brainstorming on their writing ability.

1.3. Research Question

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following question was raised:

1. Does semantic mapping along with brainstorming have any significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability?

1.4. Research Hypothesis

In order to respond to research question empirically, a null hypothesis was proposed as follows:

H₀: semantic mapping and brainstorming does not have any significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

1.5.1. Brainstorming:

Gebhard (2006) states that "Brainstorming is a pre-writing strategy in which based on a topic of interest, students call out as many associations as possible while the teacher or students jots them down" (p. 126).

1.5.2. Semantic mapping:

According to Archibald (2004) semantic mapping refers to “a visual representation of knowledge, a picture of conceptual relationships” (p. 174).

1.5.3. Writing:

To define this term, writing systems and writing processes might be characterized first. Richards & Schmidt (2002, p.592) define writing system as a system of written symbols, which represent the sounds, syllables, or words of a language. They define writing processes as the strategies, procedures and decision-making instances employed by writers as they write. In addition they believe writing is viewed as a result of complex processes of planning, drafting, reviewing and revising and some approaches to the teaching of first and second language writing teach students to use these processes. According to Hedge (1988), “writing is a straightforward act of saying what the writer can mean, the mental struggles writers go through and the interpretations readers make” (p.29).

1.6. Significance of the Study

Writing is considered as one of the four major language learning skills and as a result is a core component of language proficiency. Therefore, students need to equip themselves with enough techniques and strategies to overcome writing deficiencies. Raimes (1998) mentions that compared to other skills, there is even more anxiety involved in writing, especially when many teachers themselves do not feel entirely comfortable in writing English, even if it is their native language. She further states that with a burgeoning of conflicting theories today, planning a writing course is like walking on a minefield.

What is worse, a huge number of people- if not most- seem to be not familiar with the importance of writing. This is especially enforced since writing for

them is the least frequency used language skill in their daily lives, compared to the other three skills. People are listening when they do not even tend to listen. They have to speak even if they are reluctant to with those in their immediate and /or distant environment. Walking on the street alone or in company, one reads street signs even if one has no inclination to do so. However, when it comes to writing, it is a different story.

There are of course those students who have practiced their writing in different levels, yet due to different reasons, they cannot write efficiently due to all those various reasoning ranging from lexical inappropriacy and structural accuracy to lack of cohesion, coherence, and organization.

The finding of this study may be helpful for some cases such as students, researchers, curriculum planners, and teachers.

Semantic mapping and brainstorming is useful for students who like become a good writer and who they are weak in writing essay and letters, because one of the advantages of writing strategy is useful for writing fictions.

The result of this study may be useful for other researchers to conduct it for other levels, other sexes, and other subjects and to different areas of the country.

The finding of the study may be used by curriculum planners and curriculum developers in suggesting the given method for effective teaching of writing in English language.

The use of writing strategies might help teachers and learners improve and fortify their ability in teaching and learning of writing. The current approaches to teaching writing to EFL learners appear to be more effective than the earlier approaches because they allow the learner to explore and develop.

1.7. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study like other studies has some limitations. The researcher could not find any class of 30 subjects, and the classes in the language school are conducted with a maximum number of 15 learners. Therefore the researcher had to divide each of the experimental and control groups into two classes of 15 learners.

The study only benefited from the contribution of female participants, since it was not possible for the researcher to conduct the study on males or in a co-ed language school. The results might differ with male participants or in a co-ed situation. Therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to other contexts having males or both genders together.

The delimitation of this study was that, to have better results, the researcher chose to conduct the study in intermediate classes since students at this level are proficient enough to provide adequate input for one another.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

An integral part of ESL learning is composition writing. Raimes (1983) has this to say with regard to including writing as a part of our second language syllabus:

First writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that we have been teaching our students, Second, when our students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say, to take risks (p.3).

Bello (1997) indicated that writing, as a productive language skill, plays an essential role in promoting language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and large chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they learn in class. He added that “one of the major failing in the traditional curriculum could be attributed to lack of attention given to writing, which is an important avenue for thinking (p. 122).

As for writing in EFL, French and Rhoder (1992) stated that writing could be viewed as the main area in the curriculum that we associate with creativity, noting that writing is one of the most tasks that we can be asked to perform.

Darayseh (2003) noted that teaching writing no longer means simply having students do grammar exercises in writing or getting writing which is free from grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes, instead, we are after writing about what students are interested in and what they really want to communicate to the reader, and how they reach their final writing products (p. 152).