

Strategy Training in Pre-writing Phases of EFL Classes

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Abstract

The aim of the current study is to find out whether strategy training with the use of visual aids in pre-writing section of EFL writing classes has any facilitative effect on L2 writing development. Even though a number of studies confirmed that strategy training has a positive impact on L2 writing skills (Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2008; Ong and Zahan, 2010; Shi; 1998; among many others) the role of visual aids as a supplementary tool has not been obscured yet. Hence, the current study targets to highlight whether a strategy training by employing four distinct visual aids in pre-writing phase influences L2 writing in a positive way. For the purposes of the current study, twenty participants (ten as experimental and ten as control group members) were recruited on a voluntary basis. Strategy training consisted of four one-hour sessions in which a different aspect of L2 writing such as generating ideas, outlining, extending the text, and reflection was practiced via visuals. Data collection tools were pre and post English writing exams and a questionnaire. Data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The results revealed a significant difference between the control and experimental groups. This finding suggests that strategy trainings lead to observable progress in L2 writing scores. Moreover, visual that was related to text organization was also found to be the most effective tool while concept maps that were employed to generate ideas were favored less by the participants.

Keywords: EFL Writing, English Language Teaching, Strategy Training, Visual Aids, L2 Writing Proficiency

1. Introduction

Writing being one of the productive skills may be defined as an ability to compose in order to convey a message when it is confined to the formal instructional setting (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Moreover, it is a complex skill requiring learners to take each component of writing process into consideration and to transform the idea in a well-organized way. Its complexity arises from the interplay among cognitive processes such as planning, transcription and revision (Manchon et al. 2000). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) elaborates on this complexity highlighting multilayered figure involving three levels which are sentential, whole-text and writer-reader levels (p. 81). All these layers interact with both surface and deep level linguistic features resulting in a variety of writing products. Thus, at the instructional level, teaching writing skill to learners is a very challenging task.

The difficulty increases when the focus is shifted from writing development in L1 to L2 as some other intervening factors such as the proficiency level of the students and teaching and the learning context should be added into the overall discussion of teaching writing.

2. Literature Review

As for the effect of the learners' proficiency levels on the overall achievement of writing in L2, there are different perspectives each of which was supported by a variety of research. The first line of research suggests that writing ability and the proficiency level of the learners are independent from each other (Larios, Murphy and Marin, 2002). These studies attribute the achievement or failure of learners in L2 writing classes to their ability to use general problem solving mechanism and transfer (if there is any) from their L1 composition skills (Brooks, 1985; Cumming et al. 1989; Zamel, 1983; among many others). The others claim that there is an interaction between writing skill development and learners' proficiency levels as learners' expression is just limited to their linguistic knowledge (Yau, 1991). Although there is no consensus on the relationship between the proficiency and writing skill development in L2, it is obvious that learners are expected to reach a certain threshold level in order to produce something in L2, as proposed by Cummins (1991).

Then; due to these intervening factors involved, teaching writing in L2 calls for more effortful training processes than L1 writing. Thus, instructors teaching writing in L2 classes have to provide the most effective teaching environment that would foster learners' writing abilities by raising their cognitive awareness in the writing processes (Zhu, 2010). In addition to that, as most of the studies carried out so far emphasize the cognitive aspect

of it highlighting the fact that it is recursive, cyclic and interactive, teaching implications have been centered on the techniques that would contribute to these cognitive processes. One of the most common techniques that are employed is the strategy training since it is more like a mental probe or exercise for learners letting them to gain control over the implicit cognitive processes involved in writing in L2.

Leki (1995) identifies two sets of strategy training in the literature of L2 writing. The first one is learner oriented whereas the latter is more task oriented. In the former, it has been claimed that the strategies that should be taught to less skilled writers should be determined based on the analysis of what good writers do in their L2 writing (Zamel, 1983). Thus, it involves several stages. Initially, instructors should have clear criteria for the description of a “good writer”. Then, all cognitive processes that good writers go through involving specific strategies used by writers under certain circumstances should be explicitly defined so that they can be taught and practiced with the less skilled writers. With the second set of strategy training, it has been meant that learners should be trained to cope with different tasks at hand (James, 1993). Hence, the focus shifts from learners/writers to the tasks and the achievement depends on the learners’ capability to handle with this particular tasks. In brief, within that framework, strategic writers are the ones who can adopt themselves to the requirements of the task in the most efficient way. In brief, the role of the instructor in such a setting is to provide abundance writing tasks that would force writers to employ a variety of cognitive strategies.

As for the purposes of the current study, the type of strategy training provided falls under the second category focusing on the tasks itself since the scope of the study is limited to learners’ writing skill development which is aimed to be fostered via four particular strategy training sessions consisting of four different tasks. On the other hand, defining “good writers” and deciding on the criteria that may be taught to less-skilled writers is beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, there will be only one particular strategy used which is to involve visual aids in writing training and which has not been validated as an effective strategy employed in writing yet. Thus, strategy training carried out as for the purposes of the current study is more in line with the task oriented one.

When compared to research on the cognitive processes involved in L2 writing (Friedlander, 1990; Gaskill, 1986; Raimes, 1985; Silva, 1993; Zamel 1982, 1983), strategy training and its relation to L2 writing development has been very limited. Furthermore, as every single researcher’s perception of strategy training in L2 writing context differs, there are a number of studies entitled as strategy training in L2 writing differing to a great extent with respect to their content. In order to indicate this variability, five different studies focusing on the strategy training from different angles will be discussed below.

Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008) have investigated the effects of intensive strategy training in writing provided in both L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English). 28 first year students at a university context took part in the study. Data gathered via two open ended writing prompts (one in Japanese, the other in English) and via in-depth interviews which served as supplementary data. Researchers analyzed learners’ writings and concluded that L1 writing training helped learners to gain clarity and originality in their L1 writings whereas the training in L2 let them pay more attention to the statement of the stance at the very beginning while writing in English. In short, it was found out that strategy training may manipulate learners’ tendencies. Moreover, these tendencies may be coded in a different fashion in distinct languages. Once learners receive explicit training, their writings in both languages differ accordingly.

In another study, Piper (1989) focuses on the explicit writing instruction in L2 setting and its effects in the writing skill development. Although there is no particular strategy training in this study, it is distinctive in its being one of the earliest studies testing the effectiveness of explicit teaching in writing. When data gathered from learners were analyzed, it was found out that awareness rising with explicit writing instruction helped learners to produce much better samples of writings.

Although the scope of these studies mentioned above is not restricted to a specific stage and to a specific type of strategy, there are also some other studies highlighting the training of a particular task. To illustrate, Shi (1998) have tested whether peer discussions and teacher-led discussions in pre-writing sessions had an effect on the overall writing development of learners. There were forty seven learners who were asked to write three different opinion essays under three different conditions (peer discussion, teacher-led discussion, no discussion) in the pre-writing sessions. The author reported that there was no statistically significant difference among groups even though learners’ writings differed both quantitatively and qualitatively (p. 337). More specifically, those having no discussion in the pre-writing sessions produced longer texts, which was claimed to be one of the expected results since learners had more time that they can spend on writing. On the other hand, teacher-led discussions let learners produce shorter but more organized texts while peer discussions increased the variety in vocabulary choices of learners. Thus, Shi (1998) claimed that pre-writing activities facilitate the writing process for sure;

yet, instructors should decide on the type of strategy in accordance with their teaching objectives.

In addition to the strategies employed by instructors in the pre-writing session, there is a more recent study conducted by Ong and Zhan (2010) testing the effect of task complexity in pre-writing sessions all of which target a different strategy. Ong and Zhan (2010) focused on three factors that would manipulate the task complexity in pre-writing: availability of planning time, provision of ideas, and draft availability (p. 218). One hundred and eight Chinese EFL learners who were asked to write three different argumentative essays (differed with respect to pre-writing task determined by the factors above) were recruited in the study. The results indicated that as learners engage in more pre-writing task lexical complexity and the fluency in their writings increased. In brief, based on the findings it was suggested that instructors should use a variety of pre-writing strategies in writing classes.

Last but not least, there is also another study focusing on the use of multi-media based concept mapping and online reading before writing in pre-writing (Zaid, 2011). One hundred and eighteen Arabic EFL learners who were reported to be proficient computer users were divided into three different groups. The first group was trained with multimedia concept mapping in the pre-writing session whereas the second group did some online reading before writing. The last group did not receive any training as a control group. All these groups were asked to write three drafts for opinion essays as a pre-writing activity. At the end of the study, it was found out that multimedia concept mapping is the most effective way in pre-writing followed by online reading activity before writing enabling learners to write longer and richer texts when compared to results of the control group (Zaid, 2011). In short, when novel ways of handling with a writing task are taught, learners benefit from those to a great extent.

As it is obvious with the studies cited so far, teaching particular strategies to learners through a variety of tasks in specifically pre-writing sessions foster learners' writing ability. All these trainings provide learners a kind of mental exercise through which they gain autonomy in controlling the underlying processes of writing. Thus, strategy training plays a crucial role in L2 writing development.

Although there are a number of studies focusing on the strategy training in the pre writing session as discussed above, the use and the effectiveness of visual aids as a pre writing activity in strategy training is one of the understudied areas in L2 writing agenda. When compared to other tools used in pre-writing session, they are distinct as they have been proved to be significant in constructing a mental representation (Lowe, 1993). Keeping these in mind, this study would shed some light on the interaction between EFL writing development and strategy training.

The current study will try to find answers for the following questions: Does the use of visual aids in teaching writing lead any increase in EFL students' writing scores? If yes, what type of effect does it have on the L2 writing development? If no, what are some possible reasons leading this non-interactive relationship between L2 writing development and strategy training?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context

Participants of this study were freshman students who were enrolled to a state university in Turkey and their placement was based on their scores both in the university entrance exam and scores in the state's foreign language exam. Thus, their overall academic success was assumed to be more or less homogeneous. Still, at the beginning of each academic year, English Proficiency Exam (henceforth EPE) was administered to freshman students in order to gain deeper insight of students' L2 proficiency level. Based on the results, some extra trainings focusing on the most problematic parts of the test were organized. Students were free to attend these extra trainings although those scored less than 20 out of 40 were strongly advised to participate.

This particular study was also part of these extra trainings focusing on the writing skill development. Based on the results obtained from EPE, it was observed that majority of students had problems in their compositional skills. Those scored less than 20 out 40 in the writing component of EPE were strongly recommended to take part in the extra training while only ten of them volunteered to do so. At the beginning of the training, informed consents were obtained from all participants.

3.2 Participants

There were two groups: the experimental group consisting of ten freshman students (eight female, two male) and the control group involving ten freshman students (five female, five male). The mean age for the experimental

group was 20.9 whereas it was 18.9 for the control group. In terms of their academic achievement, they were supposed to be highly similar to each other based on the scores of the state's university entrance exam. Participants' overall L2 proficiency was not regarded as a variable as the scope of this study is limited to writing proficiency of the participants. That's why, the overall results with respect to participants' proficiency levels were excluded from the discussion. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the relationship among strategy training, participants' overall L2 proficiency and L2 writing proficiency would bring in a distinct dimension to the interpretation of the results, which may be further investigated.

3.3 Materials

As for the purposes of this study, four distinct visual aids were used in trainings in four subsequent weeks. These materials were ordered in line with Flower and Hayes (1984) writing process model which focuses on three components in composing (i.e. the composing processor, the task environment and the writer's long term memory). The composing processor is composed of processes such as planning, translating, reviewing, and monitoring (cited in Grabe & Kaplan, p.91). Thus, the sequence of the tasks was determined in accordance with these writing processes. The first task included specific prompt questions focusing on particular strategies such as expanding, extending, and elaborating. With this task, learners were trained to enlarge their ideas in a more organized and detailed manner. The theme for this task was cooperative learning which was supposed to be quite familiar topic covered in one of their courses. The second task was forming a kind of concept map. It is mainly used to generate ideas and to highlight the relationship between these ideas. The theme selected for this task was housing which was believed to attract participants' attention. The third task was to complete a template which consisted of five subsections asking specific questions (i.e. topic, introduction, main idea, supporting details, and conclusion). When participants completed the template answering the questions, there appeared a well-organized paragraph. The theme for this task was student activities at the campus. The last task aimed at raising participants' awareness of their own feelings, knowledge, details, interest, and value in composing. In a way, they were asked to take reader's stance so that they have a critical point of view of what they write. Thus, this task served for reflection purposes mostly. In terms of the theme, participants were free to work on a topic they like.

With all these tasks, the focus was on writing a paragraph since this was the first time for these students that they were explicitly trained in composing in L2 by using visual aids. Furthermore, when this study was conducted, students already started to attend to their courses at the department. One of these courses was advanced reading and writing skills involving some explicit teaching on L2 writing, too.

In addition to these tasks, there were two instruments which were pre and posttests of EPE's writing section and the questionnaire administered at the end of training in order to see participants' reflections on the training. The pre and post tests were evaluated by two different raters. On the other hand, the questionnaire included five open ended questions in participants' L1 (Turkish) and the results were analyzed by the researcher.

3.4 Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, EPE was administered and the writing component was accepted to be the pretest of the current study. Based on the results, all students scoring 20 and below out of 40 were advised to take part in the trainings although 10 students volunteered to do so. The experimental group included these 10 participants.

The experimental group attended to four trainings in four subsequent weeks. These training were in the form of all-at-once type teaching in which all steps of the task were conducted at one time. This technique was deliberately employed based on the results revealed by Ransdell et al. (2002). They (2002) claim that all-at-once strategy resulted in higher fluency and accuracy when it was compared to step-by-step fashion (p. 135). Each training session lasted approximately an hour and started with a discussion of the theme of that task in order to activate participants' schemata on that theme. After warm up session, the researcher introduced the strategy and explained what they were supposed to do. Later, as a group they composed a paragraph having small discussions on the questions raised in the tasks. Afterwards, participants were asked to form their own paragraphs making use of the strategy that was practiced. In addition to that, participants were allowed to use dictionaries and to share their ideas with their friends. At the end of the each session, participants' writings were collected but no feedback was provided so as not to bias results of the study with the possible interference from feedback. When the study was completed, all writings were given back to participants with the written corrective feedback on them.

When trainings ended, the questionnaire with five open ended questions asking for participants' reflections on the effectiveness of the use of these visual aids in their writing development was administered to the

experimental group. It was in Turkish in order to help participants to express themselves in a much easier way.

Lastly, in order to see if there is a change in participants' L2 writing skills, only writing component of a different EPE as a post test was administered to both the experimental and the control groups. In line with Ortega's (2003) claim that holistic scoring in L2 writing leads more homogenous scores, both pre and post tests were evaluated by two different raters holistically.

3.5 Data Analysis

As there were both qualitative and quantitative data, analysis carried out for basic two tools, namely pre and post tests and the questionnaire differed. Quantitative data were analyzed by comparing the mean scores of the pre and posttests to see if there is any change by running paired sample t-test analysis in SPSS 21. Qualitative data analysis was carried out by sorting out co-occurring patterns in answers for each question. After these patterns were detected, frequency of each was calculated in order to find out participants' their own evaluation of the process.

4. Results

In order to find out whether strategy training caused any improvements in EFL writing means for both pre and posttests of the experimental and control groups were calculated and compared. The means and SDs are provided in Table 1. As it is obvious with the Table 1, means of the control group in both pre and posttests were higher than scores of the experimental group.

Table1. The results of the pre and post tests

	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental group	$M = 15.3$ $SD = 4.001$	$M = 18.7$ $SD = 2.75$
Control group	$M = 26.6$ $SD = 5.337$	$M = 28.2$ $SD = 4.077$

More specifically, based on the mean scores, participants in the control group seemed to be more successful than the experimental group in L2 writing under two test conditions. However, since this study seeks to figure out any influence stemming from strategy training, the difference between pre and posttests for two groups was examined. Hence, instead of contrasting the mean scores between experimental and control groups, pre and post test results within groups were analyzed to reveal any impact depending on availability of the strategy training.

A further analysis of paired samples t-test results revealed a statistically significant difference for the experimental group; $t(9) = -3.511$, $p < 0.05$ whereas no difference for the control group; $t(9) = -1.206$, $p > 0.05$. Thus, strategy training by using visual aids seemed to have an effect on EFL learners' compositions in the experimental group. Nonetheless, the control groups' pre and posttest scores did not signal any significant change though the means were comparatively higher than the experimental groups' in both pre and posttests. In brief, it was made obvious that strategy training resulted in an increase in EFL writing scores.

Then, in line with the previous studies (Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2008; Piper, 1989; Shi, 1998; Zaid, 2011 among many others) this finding suggests that involvement of a particular strategy training in the pre-writing session influenced EFL participants' writings in a positive way. As revealed by the statistically significant difference, the experimental group's L2 writing improved when the training was over. In accordance with Shi (1998), strategy training was observed to be a useful practice in developing EFL learners' writing skills.

As the discussion makes it clear, relying solely on scores of the writing tests would provide us no way of understanding participants' feelings and perceptions of the training that they received. Thus, answers to open ended questions of the questionnaire were expected to shed some light on these reflections. To begin with, in order to provide a more unified picture, the answers were collected under three subheadings.

The first subheading was about participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of the training. All of the participants confirmed that the training with visual aids was useful. When they were asked to elaborate on the contribution, four participants stated that they learned how to write a well-organized paragraph while two expressed that they got faster in composing a paragraph. It is obvious that training raised awareness that enable participants to evaluate effectiveness of it.

The second part was related to possible contributions that were believed to result from the training. Four

participants claimed that they learned the vital components of a well-organized paragraph while three of them stated that they benefitted from trainings focusing on expanding their ideas in a more effective way. In addition to these, two participants stated that they gained control over the ways of generating new ideas through the use of concept maps. Lastly, one participant reported that s/he felt that his/her writing skills in general improved.

Table 2. Reflections on the effectiveness of the tasks

Tasks	Frequency
Stretching Ideas on “Cooperative Learning”	50%
Concept Map on “Housing”	10%
Template for writing an explanation about “Student Activities at Campus”	30%
Reflection on feelings, knowledge and interest in composing	10%

As indicated in Table 2, the last part was about the task type. Majority of the participants claimed that the most effective task was the first task consisting of a visual which guides participants to stretch their ideas. The second one was the template that involved an outline of a paragraph leaving gaps for its subsections such as the topic sentence, supporting details and conclusion. Participants’ tendencies signaled that they found visual aids highlighting the organization of a paragraph more useful than other visuals which were mainly used to generate ideas.

As it is clear with the results of qualitative data, participants reported that they benefitted from the training. Furthermore, they claimed that they learned basic features of a well-organized paragraph, which was also evident in their ratings of the most effective task of the training. The main goal of these tasks was to help learners build up a paragraph in a step by step fashion by eliciting answers for particular questions. In a way, the main concern was the organization of a text.

In brief, the results obtained from both qualitative and quantitative data in the study revealed that strategy training by using visual aids that tap distinct aspects of L2 writing process was a practical tool that could be used to foster EFL writing skills.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As discussed earlier, the aim of this study was to test whether strategy training consisting of visual aids had an impact on EFL writing proficiency. The analysis of data indicated that the writing scores of participants who took part in the strategy training increased significantly. In line with the results of the many other studies such as Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008), Piper (1989), Shi (1998), Zaid (2011), this study signaled a positive influence of strategy training on EFL writing.

Further analysis of participants’ reflections demonstrated that participants found the training useful. More specifically, they noted that they learned how to compose and gained some speed in their production process. Additionally, this training seemed to serve for awareness-raising purposes as well since some of the participants stated that they became more aware of processes involved in EFL writing.

Lastly, although some stated that concept maps that were used to generate ideas in the training sessions were highly practical tools, the tasks that lay out the text organization explicitly were claimed to be more effective than the others. In a similar vein, Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008) highlight the impact of training on EFL writing by noting that “the L2 training induced students to adopt a basic schema”. Hence, it can be argued that EFL writers who receive L2 strategy training become more skilled writers since they resort to meta-knowledge about the schema/outline of the text organization in a more effective way.

Additionally, it is significant to note that the experimental group consisted of participants who volunteered to improve their writing skills. Thus, their motivation along with the training which provided them extra practice might be one of the reasons that added to their writing scores in the post test. Zaid (2011) states that pre-writing techniques make EFL learners feel more responsible for generating ideas and composing in general. The combined effect of all these emotional aspects like motivation might have provided a further support for their success in the post test. All of these might also be one of the many other reasons that guide learners in their L2 writing skill development, which could be further investigated in future studies. Besides, Grabe & Kaplan claim that “Many strategy training studies have demonstrated success in teaching students specific techniques and

strategies, but few have demonstrated that the techniques can be transferred to contexts beyond the specific training environment” (1996, p. 130). Thus, longitudinal studies might be conducted to see the long-run effects of these strategy trainings on EFL writing.

All in all, “Research on writing tasks in classroom environments has shown that certain pre-writing activities are particularly useful for students” (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 246) and strategy training using visual aids at this specific context was proved to make a difference in EFL learners’ writing scores. Based on the analysis of the writing scores, the increase in the post test scores was found to be meaningful. Moreover, participants predominantly stated that they benefitted from tasks which focused on the organization of a paragraph. In short, the overall results reveal that there is a distinction between the control and the experimental groups in their post test scores and that there are some positive reflections of the trainings such as awareness raising in the organization of a paragraph and learning new ways to generate ideas.

Still, the current study is not without its limitations. First of all, it could have been better to involve more participants, which would definitely provide more robust statistical results. In addition to that, some other variables such as motivation, overall L2 proficiency, and duration of the training might be involved as variables in further studies.

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