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The Impact of Strategy-Based Instruction on L2 Learners' Persuasive Writing

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Abstract

It is important to teach students how to write essays in second/foreign (L2) effectively by various instructional techniques. Moreover, persuasive writing is one of the means by which students can be encouraged to create meaning. This study then investigates whether strategy-based instruction is an effective classroom-based practice in raising the ability in persuasive type of writing. Additionally, it compares the effectiveness of process-oriented strategy-based instruction with a nonstrategy-based instruction in an advanced writing course. In so doing, it employed Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) and non-SRSD (i.e. a more product-oriented traditional method) models in two writing classes at two universities. The SRSD model included six stages (Develop Background Knowledge, Discuss Strategy, Model It, Memorize It, Support It, and Independent Performance) using POW + TREE mnemonic chart, persuasive essay examples, TREE graphic organizer, and transition word chart. To probe the objectives of study, 60 Iranian EFL undergraduates participated in the study which used a pretest-posttest control group design. The analyses of covariance revealed that both SRSD and non-SRSD instructions had a significant impact on the EFL participants' persuasive writing ability. But SRSD model was significantly more effective in improving the persuasive writing ability of the EFL learners (i.e., format and content, organization and coherence, sentence construction and vocabulary in writing). By implication, if L2 learners have the necessary metacognitive knowledge and self-regulation strategies of L2 writing, they will come to achieve competence in L2 writing sooner, which allows them to attain a positive sense of self-efficacy in their writing.

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1. Introduction

Writing is an important skill that all language learners should develop. It is an act of communication and a purposeful means of addressing an audience. However, writing is currently viewed in academic circles as more than just a tool for communication. Therefore, the ability to convey meaning in written texts is an important skill for academic and professional success (Vahid Dastjerdi & Hayati Samian, 2011). Despite the importance of writing, many second or foreign language (L2) learners do not learn to write well enough to meet the demands of the courses in universities and rate writing activities among the least enjoyable or beneficial activities for learning English (Spratt, 2001). Moreover, many L2 learners struggle with the writing process as a complicated task because they have to make meaning and reflect on their own thoughts on a certain topic (Zimmerman & Reisemberg, 1997). Furthermore, among writing genres, L2 learners have even more difficulties with the persuasive writing genre because they cannot develop good arguments (Crammond, 1997, cited in Cuenca-Sanchez, 2008). As Arjmand (2012) states, if language learners use a repertoire of learning strategies, they will be able to achieve language proficiency in a much facilitated manner. Thus, language learners need to learn writing strategies that will provide them with the necessary support.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) is a type of writing strategy which was designed by Harris and Graham (1999). SRSD instruction has been proven to be effective in teaching language learners to write effectively across genres, including persuasive writing (De La Paz & Graham, 1997; De La Paz, 2005; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2004; Mason & Shriner, 2008). According to Graham and Harris (2005), SRSD approach follows six stages: develop background knowledge about the writing genre and writing strategies; discuss the students’ current abilities; model good writing strategies; assist students to memorize strategies; support what they have learned through collaboration, and boost independent performance.

Nonetheless, most of SRSD studies have explored the effectiveness of this strategy with students that have learning disabilities or writing difficulties (De La Paz & Graham; 1997; De La Paz, 2005; Graham & Harris, 1989). And, to the best knowledge of the present researchers, no studies have been conducted with English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate university students. As Ibrahimi (2011) points out, Iranian university EFL learners have problems in their writing. Besides, strategies for developing writing skill, such as generating ideas, monitoring or evaluating texts are not discussed in their programs. Therefore, this study sought to see whether SRSD instruction would affect the persuasive writing ability of Iranian EFL undergraduate students.

2. Literature review

As Celce-Murcia (2001) points out, the ability to express one’s ideas in L2 writing coherently and accurately is a major achievement that even many native speakers of English never truly master it. Learning to write a text efficiently is a long process that requires much practice and sometimes explicit and formal instruction.

The purpose of SRSD instructional model is to teach the students strategies through a series of six stages, starting with activating prior knowledge, and ending with independent work (Sandres, 2010). The use of SRSD was originally designed for use with struggling writers and learning disabled students. However, several studies have shown that average writers can also benefit from SRSD instruction (Glaser & Brunstein, 2007). As De La Paz and Graham (2002) point out, even students who are making adequate academic progress show that they benefit from explicit and teacher directed lessons. One of the great benefits of SRSD instruction is its ability to be used with a wide range of students. With varying degrees of support and intensity, this method has shown to benefit the special needs student as well as the average student.

SRSD model, as described by Santangelo, Harris, and Graham (2008), consists of six stages: 1) Develop Background Knowledge, 2) Discuss It, 3) Model It, 4) Memorize It, 5) Support It, and 6) Independent Performance.
According to Graham et al. (2008), Developing Background Knowledge focuses on making sure that students have the prerequisite skills needed to write. The second stage, Discuss It, ensures that students are motivated and willing to learn the new strategy. In this stage, students discuss their perceptions of their current writing performance and how the strategy will help them to improve their writing. At this stage, students can also set a goal for their writing by identifying one aspect of their writing that they would like to improve based upon the baseline information that was gathered in stage one. Within the Model It stage, the teacher may have to model each stage for students multiple times before the students understand the strategy. In the next stage, Memorize It, students become more familiar with the strategy. This stage is often the fastest stage and can be the most fun for students. The Support It stage imparts responsibility for using the strategy to the student. This stage is most effective when frequent constructive feedback is given along with positive reinforcement. The final stage of the model is Independent Performance. In this stage, the goal is that students will successfully use the strategy over time in different settings, as well as discuss how their writing has improved.

The exploratory study by Nicholas, Menchetti, and Nettles (2005) investigated the effects of a structured writing strategy on the quality of expository compositions produced by 36 African-American college undergraduates (27 (75%) male and 9 (25%) female, ranging from 18 to 27 years of age) who were randomly selected from current undergraduate students with learning disabilities enrolled at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). Participation in this study provided participants with an opportunity to learn organizational, time management, and learning skills that could potentially assist them in their college courses. The strategy was structured to assist students in developing a topic sentence and main ideas into body paragraphs, and in using transition words throughout the composition. The strategy effects were compared for a group that received the specific, structured writing strategy training and a control group that received general strategy instruction. Students in the strategy instruction group significantly improved their use of supporting details in producing an expository essay.

In another study, Fidalgo, Torrance, and García (2008) compared 56 eighth grade students, who previously had received instruction in strategies for planning and revising their writing, with 21 students of similar academic ability, who had not experienced the intervention. Both groups wrote an expository essay. Students who had received the intervention showed a greater tendency to pre-plan (but not to revise) their texts, produced better quality and more reader-focused writing, and were more likely to show an awareness of the importance of text structure. Also, the study by Yu-wen (2007) aimed to find out the effects of writing strategy instruction on non-English major graduate students’ writing performances by means of an empirical study. Seventy-nine students were involved from different schools of Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT). Twenty-three participants were targeted as Group A and 28 as Group B. Twenty-eight participants were chosen as the control group who received no writing strategy instruction. These students had average three class hours each week plus three-hour on-line English study. The research lasted 8 weeks and involved writing strategy instruction and pretest and posttest. In this research, Kruskal-Wallis test was employed to measure significant differences among three groups in the pretest and the posttest in terms of the subjects’ total scores, their analytic scores of the content, organization, vocabulary and language use. The significant differences in terms of content and organization among three groups (two experimental and one control group) at the posttest showed that prewriting strategy instruction helped learners generate richer ideas and organize information logically in a Chinese EFL university context.

In summary, some students experience difficulties with the writing process. They have difficulty developing content, arranging their thoughts in a coherent way, setting up goals for writing, and managing the mechanics of writing. Moreover, when writing persuasively, students have even more problems because they have trouble developing discussions and supporting their ideas. According to the above issues, SRSD intervention programs can be effective at improving students’ writing. The literature in this area tends to focus on elementary, middle or high school populations. And little research has focused on the effect of SRSD on the persuasive writing of L2 students. Thus, there is a gap to assess the effectiveness of SRSD on the persuasive writings of Iranian EFL undergraduate students.
3. Research hypotheses

This research aimed to inform English language writers of (in)effectiveness of strategy-based approaches to L2 writing. To investigate whether SRSD instruction was an effective approach in raising the ability in persuasive type of writing, and compare the effectiveness of process-oriented strategy-based instruction with a nonstrategy-based instruction in a writing course in an Iranian EFL context, two research hypotheses were developed:

H01: Using SRSD and non-SRSD instructions does not significantly improve EFL learners’ persuasive writing ability.

H02: Using SRSD instruction is not more effective than non-SRSD instruction in improving EFL learners’ persuasive writing ability.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants included 60 Iranian EFL undergraduates who enrolled in an advanced English writing course in their third year of study. The participants were all females, selected from two universities in Isfahan, Iran (i.e. Islamic Azad University, Najafabad Branch and Amin Nonprofit University, Fooladshahr Branch) and their age ranged from 21 to 25.

4.2. Instruments

This study made use of two instruments for data collection: Oxford Placement Test (OPT, 2004), and two essays. The essays included two topics, not requiring any difficult and special knowledge. The materials related to SRSD instruction included: (a) POW + TREE mnemonic chart, (b) persuasive essay examples, (c) TREE graphic organizer, and (d) transition word chart.

4.3. Procedure

First, the OPT (2004) was administered to junior undergraduate learners. Second, based on the mean score and standard deviation, just 60 Iranian EFL undergraduates were selected. Randomly, 30 participants were assigned as the control group (n =30) and 30 ones were assigned as the experimental one. Third, they were given a prompting opinion question to write persuasive essays, which were used as pretests. Fourth, the experimental group received SRSD instruction in several sessions, while the control group received traditional writing instruction in which students did not receive any process oriented strategy instruction. The experimental group received the SRSD instructional model. According to Graham et al. (2008), the SRSD instructional model, as explained in section 2 (i.e. literature review) included six stages that allowed the participants to apply a writing strategy. The general planning strategy taught to the students included three steps, represented by the mnemonic POW: Pick my ideas, organize my notes, and Write and say more. They were also taught a genre-specific strategy that prompted them to generate ideas for each of the basic parts of a persuasive writing. This strategy, represented by the mnemonic TREE, reminded students to do the following: Tell what they believe, provide at least three Reasons, End it, and Examine it. Finally, after finishing the instructions, both the experimental group and the control group participated in the posttests by having another prompting opinion question. In order to measure the quality of writing performance of the participants in the pretests and posttests, an analytic scoring rubric developed by Hyland (2003) was used. It included marks for format and content, organization and coherence, and sentence construction and vocabulary.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics of OPT scores are presented in Table 1. As demonstrated in Table 1, the OPT mean scores in the two groups (i.e. SRSD and non-SRSD groups) were not significantly different, indicating the homogeneity of
the two groups before the instructions were carried out.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of non-SRSD and SRSD Groups

| Variable | N  | Minimum | Maximum | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|----------|----|---------|---------|-------|----------------|----------|----------|
| Non-SRSD | 30 | 36      | 68      | 48.53 | 1.49           | .987     | .359     |
| SRSD     | 30 | 30      | 68      | 48.87 | 2.09           | .069     | -1.18    |

To compare the performance of SRSD (experimental) and non-SRSD (control) groups, the writing scores in both groups were obtained. As demonstrated in Table 2, the writing pretest mean scores in non-SRSD and SRSD groups were not different greatly. But, the posttest mean scores suggested a greater difference. In addition, both groups showed an increase from the pretests to posttests in the essay scores.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Writing Scores in Both Groups

| Group     | Variable                | N  | Min | Max | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|-----------|-------------------------|----|-----|-----|-------|----------------|
| Non-SDSR  | Pretest Writing Scores  | 30 | 30  | 88  | 53.25 | 14.61          |
|           | Posttest Writing Scores | 30 | 35  | 82  | 57.57 | 11.94          |
| SRSD      | Pretest Writing Scores  | 30 | 18  | 86  | 52.05 | 14.54          |
|           | Posttest Writing Scores | 30 | 38  | 95  | 67.47 | 15.21          |

To address the research hypotheses of the study, concerning the effect of non-SRSD and SRSD instructions on the participants' persuasive essays and the comparison of their effectiveness, covariate analysis was conducted. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Analysis of Covariance for the Treatment Effect on Posttest Scores

| Source               | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F    | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|----------------------|----------------|----|-------------|------|------|---------------------|
| Corrected Model      | 9561.653a      | 2  | 4780.826    | 99.01| .000 | .776                |
| Intercept            | 1628.307       | 1  | 1628.307    | 33.722| .000 | .372                |
| Pre-test             | 8091.503       | 1  | 8091.503    | 167.573| .000 | .746                |
| Group                | 1770.122       | 1  | 1770.122    | 36.659| .000 | .391                |
| Error                | 2752.331       | 57 | 48.287      |       |      |                     |
| Total                | 246814.000     | 60 |             |      |      |                     |
| Corrected Total      | 12313.983      | 59 |             |      |      |                     |

a. R Squared = .776 (Adjusted R Squared = .769)

The results in Table 3 revealed that, first, the model was significant, $F(2, 57) = 99.01 \cdot p < .01$. Second, there was a strong linear relationship between pretest and posttest scores because the $p$ value of pretest scores was found to be significant, $F(1, 57) = 168 \cdot p < .01$. More important, the treatments of the study had a significant effect on the
The results of the study revealed that the mean scores improved from the pretests to the posttests in both groups of the study. That is, the instructions in both groups had a significant impact on the participants' writing ability. Moreover, the SRSD group performed significantly better than traditional group in the posttests. Thus, the findings lead to the rejection of the null hypotheses of the study.

The above findings indicate that with the use of SRSD, L2 students are able to better understand the writing process. SRSD instruction allows L2 students to learn valuable writing strategies without using a formulaic writing style. This is essential to foster critical thinking skills, and it allows L2 students to have ownership of their writing. The SRSD strategy for persuasive writing POW+TREE, teaches students to break down their opinions and ideas into manageable components before and during the writing process. Also, it teaches students to use self-regulation skills along the writing process to monitor the writing process. It is anticipated that students who receive SRSD instruction for POW+TREE in persuasive writing will have greater gains in essay quality when compared to students that receive traditional writing instruction.

Furthermore, the results obtained in the present study support the results obtained by Nicholas et al. (2005), who reported that strategy instruction group significantly improved their use of supporting details in producing an expository essay. This shows that SRSD can be effective for other genres as well. Also, the results of this study support Fidalgo et al. (2008) findings. They stated that their strategy-based writing group produced better quality texts and more reader-focused writing; their participants showed a greater tendency to pre-plan their texts, and were more likely to show an awareness of the importance of text structure. The findings of the study by Yu-wen (2007) are partially consistent with the findings of the current study, too. There were significant differences in terms of content and organization among three groups of Yu-wen's study (i.e. two experimental groups and one control group) in the posttest. The majority (91%) of the participants who had strategy instruction felt more confident in their writing, especially in generating ideas and organizing information.

7. Conclusion

A primary goal of education is to teach students how to read and write. The inclusion of writing in national educational assessments emphasizes the increased importance of L2 writing in toady’s world. The present study investigated the effect of strategy-based instruction (i.e. SRSD) on the persuasive writing of Iranian EFL learners. Additionally, it compared the effectiveness of process-oriented strategy-based instruction with a nonstrategy-based instruction in a writing course. The results demonstrated that the instructions were effective in improving the persuasive writing performance of the EFL participants. Also, SRSD instruction was found to be more effective than the traditional nonstrategy-based instruction. Thus, SRSD may help L2 students better understand which strategies are more helpful and can facilitate the process of writing; L2 students who are self-regulated learners set goals for themselves and then independently plan, manage, and evaluate what it takes to reach their goals.

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