

Impact of Using a Constructivism Strategy to Enhance EFL University Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

This research investigates writing skills needed for EFL students and the effectiveness of mind-map strategy in improving students' writing skills. The sample of the research consists of 80 male and female second-year students from the Department of English /College of Education for Humanities / University of Mosul for the Academic year 2018/2019. The sample was divided between two groups; experimental and control; 40 students each. The researcher prepared a list of EFL writing skills and posttest in writing. A set of activities was also designed by the researcher to train students by using two constructivism strategies; viz. Problem solving and mind-mapping. The results show the effectiveness of mind-mapping in developing writing skills for college level students. In the light of the findings, number of recommendations was set

Impacto del uso de una estrategia de constructivismo para
mejorar las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes univer-
sitarios de EFL

Resumen

Esta investigación investiga las habilidades de escritura necesarias para los estudiantes de EFL y la efectividad de la estrategia del mapa mental para mejorar las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes. La muestra de la investigación consta de 80 estudiantes masculinos y femeninos de segundo año del Departamento de Inglés / Colegio de Educación para las Humanidades / Universidad de Mosul para el año académico 2018/2019. La muestra se

dividió entre dos grupos; experimental y control; 40 estudiantes cada uno. El investigador preparó una lista de habilidades de escritura EFL y post prueba por escrito. El investigador también diseñó un conjunto de actividades para capacitar a los estudiantes mediante el uso de dos estrategias de constructivismo; verbigracia. Resolución de problemas y mapeo mental. Los resultados muestran la efectividad del mapeo mental en el desarrollo de habilidades de escritura para estudiantes de nivel universitario. A la luz de los hallazgos, se establecieron varias recomendaciones

Statements of the Problem

Writing is not just a self-expression mean, but also a basic academic skill in learning any foreign language. Learning how to write may be difficult for many individuals and takes much practice and patience. EFL students as well as native English speakers need to have a basic understanding of grammar structure, tense usage, vocabulary, and how to commit thought process and ideas into paper. Therefore, the recent years have witnessed new direction in studying writing which does not just concentrate on writing processes but also on the used strategies to implement these processes.

Writing strategies are regarded performance or behaviours performed by students so as to improve their writing. These strategies do not include just knowledge functions such as (understanding) and producing but also "functions beyond knowledge such as planning, correcting, organizing the writing process by the individuals, as well as other functions namely remuneration, emotional and social functions". (Oxford, 1996).

The current study seeks to develop writing skills in English through using constructive strategy. Constructivism is an ongoing process of building a creative re-organization which the individual is going through his experience to understand the broader and more comprehensive understanding which is suggested by previous experience. Mind map is one of the constructivist strategies. It is used to deepen understanding and learning. Therefore, it is a tool that has the ability to organize concepts, including the image of the hierarchical layout classifying concepts according to the degree of stripping and abstract concepts, and thus highlights the relations between concepts and increasing the engagement and the meaning among them.

Mind map is a powerful tool which represents any information in a form of visual frameworks, using words, images, and numbers. Putra (2002) states that "mind map can be used to enable students to see the relationship between ideas or to help students to associate ideas, think creativity, and make connec

tions that might not otherwise make. It is also used to explore any topics in every kind of writing such as; narrative, descriptive, persuasive, and argumentative".

The researcher noted that writing in English is a challenging task for the students in English language department at the College of Education for Humanities/ University of Mosul. Some of their social and cultural background prevents them from writing about subjects they consider taboo, like politics or religion. Students also experience difficulties with form, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. That are different in English and their native language. It is noteworthy that the EFL instructors use traditional methods in teaching writing, in addition to the absence of interaction among the students themselves and students and the teacher.

This research will be an attempt to investigate the effect of a constructivism strategy (mind mapping) on teaching writing to the first year students in English Language Department at the College of Education for Humanities for the academic year 2018-2019.

Aim of Research:

The current research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the writing skills needed for EFL students?
2. What is the effectiveness of mind-mapping strategy in improving students writing skills?

Hypotheses:

In the light of the aims of the research, the researcher set the following null hypotheses:

1. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and those of the control group in the post-test of the writing.
2. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of males and females in the first test of writing for the two groups in the post-test of the writing.

Defining Basic Terms:

1. Constructivism:

"Constructivism is an educational theory built around the idea that a person learns new material by constructing his or her idea of the world, and then adds to or alter this view in order to continue to learn".

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-constructivism.htm>.

Von Glasersfeld (2004) defined it as "a theory in knowledge with roots in philosophy and psychology, focusing on the role of the learner in the construction of personal knowledge".

The researcher defines constructivism operationally as a learning theory found in psychology which explains how people might acquire knowledge and learn. It therefore has direct application to education. The theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences.

2. Strategy:

Reponen T. (1993) defines strategy as "a particular procedure for teaching a particular topic or lesson".

Also, it is defined as "the solution plan that helps the learners access and understand the problem and give him the guiding and effective means to solve that problem".

Operationally, the researcher defines it as "a specific plan that consists of a set of methods, techniques, and activities which are followed in the classroom to get to the better performance of writing English by college students".

3. Mind-mapping:

Bell and Gipp (2010:1) define mind-mapping as "a common method to structure and visualize ideas, manage electronic literature and to draft documents".

Al-Jarf (2014: 4) states that "mind-mapping is a graphic organizer in which the major categories radiate from a central idea and sub-categories are representative as branches of larger branches. It is a visual tool that can be used to generate ideas, take notes, organize thinking, and develop concepts".

Operationally, mind-map, is a strategy for making notes on a topic, prior to writing. It is a structured strategy, which shows the (hierarchical) relationship of ideas, as opposite to an unstructured strategy such as brainstorming.

4. Writing Skills:

Rivers (1989) "defined writing as just notation, copying something already writing, or reproducing in writing form, something which had been read or heard. It is a thinking process in which the writer organizes these thoughts, develops his /her idea, outlines these ideas and forms them in a paragraph starting with a topic sentence, supporting details, and closing sentence".

Hannah (2002) states that "writings is at the root of every skill". She said that "writing is the tool of learning that cannot be delayed until students achieve a high level of proficiency. Rather it can be a part of teaching at every level".

Theoretical Study:

1. Constructivist Teaching:

Constructivist teaching is based on Constructivist learning theory. This theory holds that learning always builds open knowledge that student already knows; this

prior knowledge is called a schema. Through pre-existing schemata, constructivists suggested that learning is more effective when a student is actively engaged in the learning process rather than attempting to receive knowledge passively. A wide variety of methods claim to be based on constructivism learning theory. Most of these methods rely on some form of guided discovery where the teacher avoids most direct instruction and attempts to lead the students through questions and activities to discover, discuss, appreciate and verbalize the new knowledge.

One of the primary goals of using constructivist teaching is that students learn by giving them the training to take initiative for their own learning experiences. According to Audrey Grey, "the constructivist classroom is beneficial as learners are actively involved, environment is democratic, activities are interactive and students-centered, and the teacher facilitates a process of learning in which students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous".

In a constructivist classroom, the teacher's role is to promote and facilitate discussion. Thus, the teacher's main focus should be guiding students by asking questions that will lead them to develop their own conclusions on the subject. The teacher's major roles are: modeling, coaching, and scaffolding. In a constructivist classroom, children learn more and enjoy learning more when they are actively involved, rather than passive listeners. In addition, education works best when it concentrates on thinking and understanding, rather than on rote memorization. Constructivism concentrates on learning how to think and understand.

2. Writing Skill:

Writing is that skill through which the writer reflects his/ her thoughts and express his/ her inner feelings. It is not merely putting down words in a sentence, or writing one sentence beside the other to form a paragraph planned, organized their ideas, determine and used a paragraph outline, figured out meaning and put it into language in a coherent identity. Writing is a very difficult task. It is even more difficult than speaking. So, writing is a means of self-assessment. It is the mirror through which the writer can see his/ her upgrading or degrading. When the writer writes a good piece of writing that can be understandable and significant, he can see his progress.

For many years, it was assumed that the writing process generally operated in some variations of the following three stages:

- Pre-writing Activities:

Everything that takes place before the first draft. In which, the writer focuses on that subject, spots and audience, chooses a form which may carry his subject to his audience.

- Writing Activity:

The act of producing a first draft. It is the fastest part of the writing process

to complete a draft.

- Re-writing Activity:

The reconsideration of a subject, a form, and an audience. It is researching, rethinking, editing and satisfying the process of writing to make each word right.

Agate (2005:2) stress the importance of writing skills by indicating that "writing is not only an important academic skill, not only a vital tool for success in schools and universities, but also an important skill and an essential tool in the life that follows". Writing skill plays an effective role in developing students mental abilities. It helps students more easily among facts, inferences and opinions without getting confused. It also equips learners with the communication and thinking skills they need to participate effectively in the society. It motivates students thinking, organizing ideas, developing their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize.

Many teaching strategies can be used to develop writing skills; such as problem solving, brain-storming, mind-mapping, and concept-mapping.

3. Mind-mapping:

It is a strategy for helping students order and structure their thinking through mentally mapping words and concepts. Mind-maps are developed by Tony Buzan as a way of helping students make notes that used only keywords and images. They are much quicker to make, and because of the visual quality much easier to remember and review. The difference between concept map and mind-map is that mind map has only one main concepts, while a concept map may have several.

This strategy helps students quickly relate a central word or concept. The mind forms associations almost instantaneously and mapping allows them to write their ideas quicker, using only words or phrases.

To make a mind map, the teacher starts in the center of the page with the main idea and work outward in all directions, producing a growing and organized structure composed of keywords and key images. Key features are:

- Organization.
- Key words.
- Associations.
- Clustering.
- Visual memory- using keywords, colour, symbols... etc.
- Outstandingness.
- Conscience involvement.

Mind map helps organize information. This can allow students to develop

a

strategy for note-taking, report writing, studying the easy way, studying as a group, meetings.

Procedures:

The present research used the quasi-experimental design. The data was collecting to test 2nd year EFL College level students' writing skills. This should be done through a pre- post test to compare students' performance before and after the experiment.

The sample of the research was consisted randomly of 80 students; 47 male and 33 female students from English Department at the College of Education for Humanities/ University of Mosul. The sample was distributed among two groups; experimental (40) students and control (40) students, as shown in table 1:

Table 1
The Sample of the Research

Group	Males	Females	Total
Experimental	24	16	40
Control	23	17	40
Total	47	33	80

The experimental group was taught writing skills by using mind-mapping strategy, while the was taught by using traditional methods, namely problem-solving. The research demanded the following procedures:

1. A list of EFL writing skills, prepared by the researcher. It was classified into five main skills, each skill has a number of some sub-skills. The list was given to a jury members to tests its face validity and appropriateness for 2nd year college level students.(see Appendix A).
2. A pre-post test to measure 2nd year students EFL writing skills.
3. Set of activities designed by the researcher to train students by using two strategies; viz. problem-solving and mind-mapping.

The test was divided into two parts; the first one consisted of two sections of 20 marks for each. The second part was also consisted of two optional tasks. In sections 3 and 4, the student was asked to draw a diagram expressing his/her ideas. Tis made the following stage of real writing easy as the ideas are already

poured down on a paper. This test was constructed on the basis of a table of specifications for writing sub-skills. To test the reliability, the researcher adopted the test-retest method. The resulting coefficient of reliability was found to be (0.78), thus the test was reliable.

The experiment of the research was started on Sunday 14th, Oct. 2018 and ended on Thursday 11th, April 2019. It lasted for five months comprising two semesters. The experiment started by giving the pre-test for students and collecting data. Then, the researcher started teaching students in the two groups the writing skills depending on the two strategies. The students was administrated to posttest at the end of the experiment. The collected data was analyzed to conclude finings.

Results:

The main purpose of the present study was to develop EFL writing skills for the second year college level students through using mind-mapping strategy. T-test for two independent samples was used to measure the differences between pre-post test and males and females students by relating them to the study hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1:

There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and those of the control group in the posttest of the writing.

The collected data, resulted from posttest in writing for the two groups, have been analyzed and tested statistically. The finding is shown in table 2 below:

Table 2

T-test for the difference between mean scores of posttest for the two groups

group	NO.	Mean	SD.	T-value	
				calculated	tabulated
experiment	40	16.275	2.491	6.757	1.994
control	40	13.025	1.746		

By using t-test for two independent samples, the mean scores of the posttest in writing has been tested. The calculated t-value is 6.757. It is found to be higher than the tabulated value 1.994 at 0.05 level of significance and 78 degrees of freedom. This indicated that there is statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups for the benefit of experimental group as it scores mean higher than the control one. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 2:

There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of males and females in the first test of writing for the two groups in the post-test of the writing.

The data collected was calculated for male and female students in the two groups to test the difference between them in the posttest. The mean scores and standard deviation for students in the two groups was calculated and tested using t-test for two independent samples, as shown in table 3 below:

Table 3

T-test for the difference between male and female students in writing

Gender	No.	Mean	SD.	T-value	
				calculated	tabulated
Male	47	14.803	2.922	1.186	1.994
Female	33	14.091	2.467		

By using t-test for two independent samples, the mean scores of the posttest in writing was tested for the whole sample (male and female). The calculated t-value is 1.186. It is lower than the tabulated value 1.994 at 0.05 level of significance and 78 degrees of freedoms. This indicates that there is no difference between male and female students in writing test. It is obvious that the constructivist strategy doesn't affected by gender. Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted.

Discussion of results:

The statistical analysis of the results points out that the scores of students in the experimental group is significantly higher in average than those of students in the control group in wriging posttest. The result confirms the contrubution of mindmapping to the second year students writing skills. This indicates that mind-mapping is more positive to learning than the traditional method.

During the experiment, students in the experimental group are more interested in writing than those in the control group. The findings show the advantages of mind-mapping and how students can generate ideas easily so that they can develop it into a good written paragraph as it is made in a hierarchical way, link ideas, or add connections.

Moreover, students in the experimental group were excited. They needed to organize the ideas in a good order so that it gave them ease to develop the ideas. At last, brain responds to the mind-mapping as it replicates the natural thinking process. So, students will find ideas simply flow onto the page, making their studying more enjoyable than that in the control group. This indicates that using mind-mapping in teaching writing skills is relatively meaningful, interesting and helpful for the learners.

Recommendations:

In the light of the finding, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Teachers should be aware of the necessity of using writing skills in teaching.
2. Intensive practice needs to be given when dealing with writing skills. The more students are exposed to these skills, the better their performance on writing will be.
3. Teachers should be well trained on how to use the constructivism strategies in order to make a good use of them in teaching English.
4. Teachers are recommended to give up the role of judges penalizing their students for committing mistakes. They are required to realize that making errors is a natural phenomenon which cannot be avoided in the learning process. Teachers are recommended to encourage their students to take part in the evaluation process and teach their students how to evaluate their own writing works as well as their peers.
5. Teachers should guide students in activities and strategies that help them become more proficient in generating information and controlling writing skills.

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