

EFFICACY OF SELF REGULATED STRATEGY INSTRUCTION IN PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION OF OPINION ESSAYS OF ESL/EFL WRITERS AT TERTIARY LEVEL

By

MARUTHI KUMARI VADDAPALLI *

HELEN WOERNER **

* Assistant Professor, Department of Languages and Translation, Dhofar Univeristy, Salalah, Oman.

** Lecturer, Department of Languages and Translation, Dhofar Univeristy, Salalah, Oman.

ABSTRACT

Writing is an essential academic skill. Effective writing is a complex process requiring the skillful use of techniques and strategies (Zimmerman and Reisinger, 1997). Unlike skilled writers, struggling writers lack certain strategies and techniques that could help them become effective writers. The present study investigates the effectiveness of SRSD with struggling EFL/ESL writers at the tertiary level. A classroom-based intervention study aimed to determine whether simplifying the writing task by automatizing certain mechanical elements through strategy training using SRSD reduces students' cognitive load, allowing them to engage in higher order thinking processes. The study was conducted at a university in Oman. Baseline, terminal and maintenance probes were administered to determine participants' relative gains in task achievement, organization, lexis and grammar. The essays were evaluated using a conventional 9 point scale and the results were analyzed. The results revealed considerable gains in organization and lexis indicating that automatization of the more mechanical elements of the writing process enabled students to write better quality essays. These results indicate that SRSD can be an effective method of instruction for struggling/underprepared EFL/ESL writers at the university level.

Keywords: Writing Skills, Struggling Writers, Strategy Instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Writing proficiency is an essential skill in academics. Both higher education and the world of work require effective writing skills. Students graduating from schools, colleges and universities require writing skills for many purposes such as writing reports, electronic mails, memoranda, and so on. Nevertheless, students all over the world experience difficulties with writing. The report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates, 2002), on the writing abilities of American students presents very disappointing results; only 28% of the 4th grade, 31% of the 8th grade and 21% of the 12th grade students scored at or above proficiency levels. Effective writing skills have become a prerequisite for employment and promotion. In both public and private sector employees need training in basic writing skills (National commission on Writing, 2004, 2005). Therefore, it is essential that students acquire effective writing skills in order to succeed academically and in the

workplace.

The Complexity of Writing

Writing is a complex process that includes prewriting, drafting and revising. Writers must formulate their thoughts, organize their ideas and produce comprehensible texts while bearing in mind the conventions of spelling and grammar. In order to deal with such complexities, successful writers utilize a variety of writing techniques and strategies. Skilled writers possess strategies for planning, organizing and composing texts. They establish goals and continuously revise and refine their texts during the writing process. (Flower and Hayes, 1980). Nevertheless, even expert writers frequently complain about the difficulty of planning, organizing and composing their work (Zimmerman and Reisinger, 1997).

In contrast to skilled writers, struggling writers do not utilize the strategies and techniques that could enable them to write more effectively. They are not aware of the features of effective writing, use an inefficient writing approach, lack

prior planning, have difficulty in creating content, seldom revise their work, and possess an unrealistic sense of self efficacy (Graham&Harris, 2005a; Harris & Graham, 1996).

The SRSD Approach

Because of the complexity of the writing process, instructors of writing may attempt to make writing less complex, by teaching the use of writing strategies. An effective cognitive strategy enables learners to plan what they will do and then monitor and modify their own thoughts and actions as they proceed. One such Strategy is Self Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD). Self regulation refers to "self-initiated thoughts, feelings and actions that writers use to attain various literary goals, which include improving the writing skills and enhancing the quality of the text they create"(Zimmerman&Reisemberg,1997, p.76).

SRSD is a flexible instructional model that assists students in learning strategies of planning, drafting and revising that skilled writers employ. SRSD supports the development of cognitive and self-regulation skills that are essential to writing. It has been demonstrated to be an effective and useful procedure for teaching brainstorming, organizing and content generation as well as editing and revising texts (Graham and Perrin, 2006). Numerous studies indicate a direct connection between learners' self regulation and academic achievement. (Jones&Idol 1990, Zimmerman& Pons 1986). Zimmerman and Martinex-Pons (1986) identified self regulated learning as a single, overarching factor, most highly correlated with achievement. The effectiveness of SRSD in writing knowledge, Although methods like SRSD and CSIW are frequently used for students with learning disabilities, it has been demonstrated to be useful methods to improve the writing skills of struggling writers as well as experienced writers. Englert and her colleagues(Englert et al.1991) administered a program called Cognitive Strategy Instruction Program (CSIW) on children with and without learning disabilities. Strategy instruction was provided for planning, organizing, writing, editing and revising. Their research proved that both students with and without learning disabilities performed better at writing papers. Graham &Perin(2007) found strategy instruction effective on students with and without learning disabilities. Cognitive Strategy instruction helps

students to develop skills that are necessary to be independent and self regulated learners. Strategy development makes the learner set a goal and gain conscious control over the writing process. SRSD approach is proved to be effective in implementing Strategy instruction. However, any strategy is effective only if it is implemented correctly. SRSD model provides the 'process' of the implementation of strategy instruction. Learners' better academic performance and their ability of self regulation are strongly related (Borkowski, et. al., 1990)

A major component of SRSD model is task automatization. Certain elements of language such as spelling, pronunciation, sentence structure are accessible to automatization. According to Westwood (2004) "A learner who lacks automaticity has to expend inappropriately large amounts of concentrated effort in recalling information or remembering simple lower-order steps in a cognitive process. Therefore, he or she is hampered in engaging in higher-order thinking".

SRSD techniques make automatization easy for students. Automatization is also useful in planning and organization of an essay. Previous research proves that the techniques of SRSD are effective for automatization of mechanical elements such as planning and organization (Dela Paz.S & Graharm.S, 1997). Lack of the ability to automatize procedural knowledge makes it difficult to learn a skill.

Stages of SRSD

SRSD involves six stages; develop background knowledge, discuss the strategy, model the strategy, memorize the strategy, support the strategy and finally independent performance. However, the stages of SRSD are flexible and they can be modified and adapted by the teacher based on the needs of the class room.

Students at universities in Oman

Tertiary level students in Oman are NOT students with learning disabilities. However, many are low achieving writers. Since the main language of Oman is Arabic, almost all schools use Arabic as the medium of instruction with a few exceptions of private schools. English language literacy until a few years ago began in Grade 5 and other than English, all the subjects were taught in Arabic. After graduating from school, the students enter tertiary level

with poor language skills and limited strategies for learning. The reasons for this situation can be rote learning, poorly qualified teachers, memorization etc.

Aim

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of an adapted model of SRSD in planning and organization of writing. Most research on SRSD was conducted with students with learning disabilities. Little research has taken place with ESL/EFL learners. We have piloted this project to determine the efficacy of SRSD with EFL/ESL learners at university level. We explored whether simplifying the writing task by automatizing certain mechanical elements through strategy training using SRSD lightens the cognitive load of the students thus giving them scope to focus more on language. The focus of the research was on planning and organization, the prewriting tasks.

Methodology

The study took place at a university in Oman. The students were all Arabic speakers. All the participants in the Study were students of Basic Academic English-II(ENGL102). The study was undertaken over a period of 6 class hours.

Data Collection

Before the study began, a diagnostic test to write an opinion essay was given to the students. The purpose was to establish a baseline. After the strategy instruction, a quiz was administered. The teachers maintained the treatment and a final test was conducted. From both classes, three weaker, three average and three stronger essays were chosen from the diagnostic, quiz and the final test for data analysis.

Strategy Instruction

The strategy instruction involved four stages

Stage1

The teachers gave an overview of the parts of a three paragraph essay using an adapted textbook model. The students were asked to identify the parts of the opinion essay. The purpose of this procedure was to automatize essay elements. In order to do so, the students were introduced to an SRSD model by using a mnemonic 3-7-3. In previous studies mnemonics such as DARE, TREE were used to represent the writing process and the parts of an

essay (Graham & Harris, 1989b). The first number 3 represented the elements of the introductory paragraph which the authors referred to as the hook, background information and the thesis statement. The '7' represented the elements of the body paragraph which were taught as abbreviations: T.S for 'topic sentence';S.P1 for supporting point 1 and 'D' for details; S.P2 for supporting point 2 and 'D' for details; C.A for counter argument and 'R' for refutation. The teachers asked students to write and recite all the elements in small groups and as a class until it was apparent that the essay parts had been automatized. The whole process took two hours of class instruction.

Stage 1(1 1/2hours)

A simple rubric was introduced to the class. The components of the rubric included Task Achievement, Organization, Vocabulary and Grammar. Although all the components of the rubric were discussed, emphasis was placed on organization corresponding to the 3-7-3 model.

A number of diagnostic essays written by students who were not participating in the study were distributed to the class and students were instructed to evaluate the essays in terms of the rubric focusing on organization. After they had given marks to the sample essay based on the rubric, the students were asked to set a goal for the mark they would like to achieve in the upcoming quiz. The teachers discussed the importance of motivation. The students said that setting a goal gave them a specific target for learning.

Stage 1:(1 hour)

Collaborative Writing

Teachers modeled brainstorming (mapping) on the board. The students were then asked to apply this technique in their group to a different topic that had been assigned. Following brainstorming, the teacher elicited students' ideas and wrote them as notes on the board. Then in collaboration, the students and the teacher constructed the essay orally following the 3-7-3 formula.

Stage 1(2&1/2 hrs)

The teachers reviewed the parts of the essay noting that the students had difficulty with two of the parts. A second model essay from the writing book was analyzed to reinforce the strategy and to clarify difficult elements. The

students did another collaborative essay with their groups with limited support from the teachers.

The students wrote a quiz immediately after the strategy training in the next class. The mid-term was two weeks after the quiz. The quiz essays were marked and returned to the students. The syllabus allowed no further instruction at this point of time. The mid-term exam included an opinion essay two weeks after the quiz. The mid-term was considered maintenance probe.

Data Analysis

The diagnostic essay (base line probe), the quiz (experimental probe) and the midterm (maintenance probe) were analyzed in relation to the number of words, the number of elements and the rubric. The number of words was considered as an indication of fluency. The essays were grouped into lower, middle and higher range in terms of their quality and three essays from each group were randomly selected from both classes. The data was tabulated in terms of the rubric. Analysis of the task achievement, organization, vocabulary and grammar was done. Two teachers independently rated each essay. Where there was a difference in score, the essays were reviewed collaboratively to arrive at a common score. The rubric levels ranged from 1 to 9. The mean scores for each element were calculated in order to examine the effects of instruction. The total number of words was calculated and their mean was obtained. The number elements were counted as a measure of improvement in the organization. The essays were expected to have 13 elements.

Figure 1 presents the students' average number of words

written in their essays in the diagnostic, quiz and the mid-term.

The mean scores of the number of words were calculated classifying the students writing as lower, middle and higher. the graph shows that the lower and higher levels have showed great improvement in terms of number of words written.

The mean score for the number of words with respect to poorly written essays in the diagnostic was 106.3 and in the quiz, it dramatically went up to 199.3 and it remained almost stable with an average of 197.3. It is interesting to observe the average of the students who are in the medium range. The number of words showed gradual increase from the diagnostic to the midterm. The mean score in the diagnostic was 219.2. In the quiz, it was 285 and in the final it was 329.3. When we look the good essays, the average has shown a steep increase from the diagnostic to the quiz and it marginally increased from the quiz to the mid-term. The averages were, the diagnostic, 148.2, the quiz 252.3 and the midterm 281.5. The results show that the students at the lower level and high levels have shown a great improvement after the diagnostic. The strategy instruction helped them focus more on writing since the mechanical elements of the essay were automatized.

Figure 2 shows the students' improvement in using the different elements of opinion essay. The Strategy instruction used a mnemonic 3-7-3 to automatize the mechanical elements of the essay. The total number of elements were 13. It is interesting to note that the mean score for the

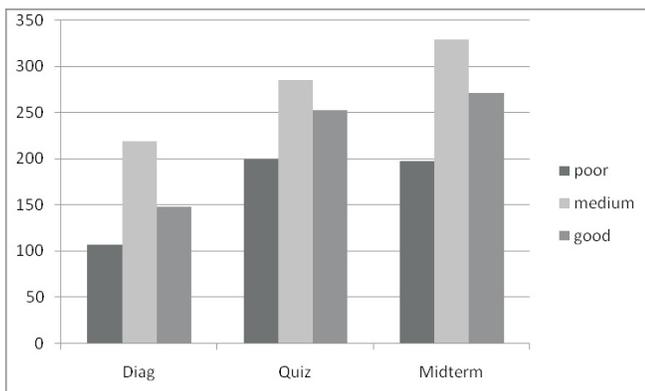


Figure 1. Number of Words

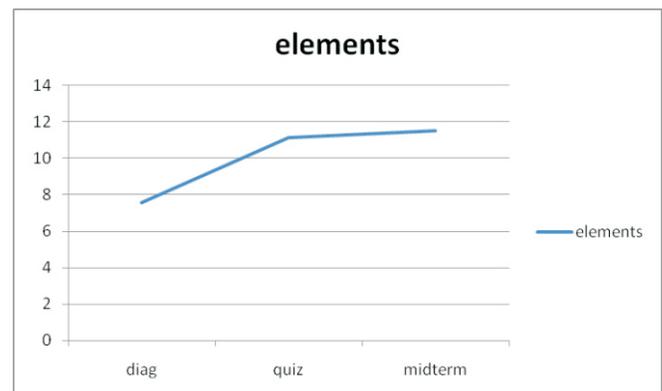


Figure 2. Number of Elements

number of elements was only 7.55 in the diagnostic. However, in the midterm it went up to 11.11 and in the midterm it was 11.5 which is a great improvement. The strategy instruction helped the students in writing more and including more elements in their essays.

The essays were marked on a 9 point scale and averages were obtained. Figure 3 shows the average scores of the diagnostic, quiz and midterm in terms of task achievement, organization, lexis and grammar.

The average score on the diagnostic essay was 4.6. The mean for the quiz was 5.1 and the midterm was 5.3. The percentage of improvement from the diagnostic to the quiz was 10% and to the midterm was 15.2%. This shows that the students were able to improve in the task achievement to some extent.

The mean score for the organization of the essay on the diagnostic was 4.7. In the quiz it was 5.3 and it remained unchanged on the midterm. The percentage of improvement from the diagnostic to the quiz and the midterm was 12.7%. The students showed better performance in organization of their essay since the strategy instruction was focused on helping them with planning and organization.

The average score for the lexis in the diagnostic was 4.9. It went up to 5.3 in the quiz and further increased to 5.6. The percentage of increase was 8.6% from the diagnostic to the quiz. However, there is a considerable improvement between the quiz and midterm. The percentage of improvement has almost doubled. The percentage of improvement in the midterm was 14%

The students seemed to be weak in grammar. There is not

much improvement in grammar between the diagnostic and the midterm. This could be because the students had strategy instruction training only in organization and planning. The average score for grammar in the diagnostic was 4.7 and the quiz was 4.9. The difference is marginal. However, in the midterm, their average went up to 5.3. The percentage of improvement was only 4.2% between the diagnostic and the quiz. There was 12.7% improvement between the diagnostic and the midterm.

The total grade was calculated by averaging all the scores and the mean for the total grades was also found. The mean for the total grade obtained in the diagnostic was 4.8. The mean score rose to 5.1 in the quiz and it increased to 5.3 in the midterm.

The results show that the students' lexical resource has considerably increased and on the whole the students performed better after the strategy instruction training. Since the students had spent time on organization and planning and learned to automatize the elements of an essay, it is evident that their organization and lexis improved to a great extent when compared to grammar and task achievement.

Conclusion

The greatest improvement was found in organization and lexis. This shows that if students automatize the more mechanical elements of the writing process, their cognitive capacity will be available for higher level thinking. The SRSD approach has proved to be effective in improving the students' writing skills of struggling or underprepared ESL/EFL writers.

The three main traditions, the product, the process and the genre do not prescribe any teaching methodologies. In fact, they are theories which are applied in different contexts. So, there is no uniform method of writing instruction and no general consensus on the methodology for writing instruction can be found. However, SRSD approach may provide the newly qualified teachers, teachers from other disciplines such as literature and linguistics who find themselves assigned to basic writing courses for institutional needs, may find SRSD a useful methodology since it offers a package that may guide them in writing instruction.

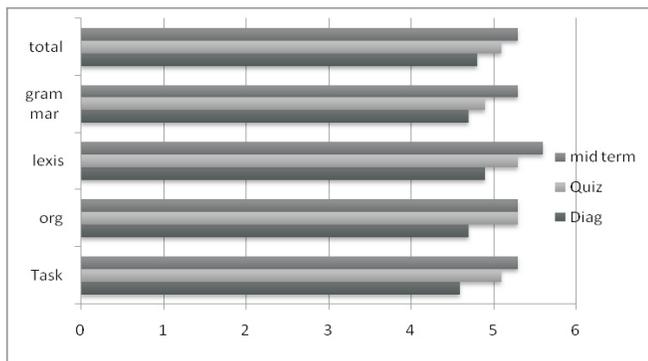


Figure 3. Grades

References

- [1]. Borkowski, J.G., Carr, M. Rellinger, E.& Pressley, M. (1990). Self-regulation Cognition: Interdependence of metacognition, attributions and self-esteem. In, B.F. Jones & Idol, L.(Eds.), *Dimensions of thinking and cognitive Instruction*. NJ:Erlbaum.
- [2]. De la Paz, S., Graham, S.(1997). Strategy instruction in planning: Effects on the writing performance and behavior of students with learning difficulties. *Exceptional children*, 63, 167-181
- [3]. Englert, C., Raphael, T., Anderson, L., Anthony, H., Stevens, D., & Fear, K.(1991). Making writing Strategies and self-talk visible: Cognitive strategy instruction in writing in regular and special education classrooms. *American Education Research Journal*, 28, 337-373.
- [4]. Flower, L.,& Hayes, J.(1980). The dynamics of composing: Making plans and juggling constraints, In L.Gregg & E.Steinberg (Eds.) *Cognitive processes in writing* (pp.31-50, Hillsdale, NJ:Erlbaum.
- [5]. Graham, S. (2006). Strategy instruction and the teaching of writing: A meta-analysis. In C, MacArthur, S.Graham, & J.Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp187-207). Newyork:Guilford.
- [6]. Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2005a). Improving the writing performance of young struggling writers: Theoretical and programmatic research from the Center on Accelerating Student Learning. *Journal of Special Education*, 39, 19–33.
- [7]. Graham, S., & Harris K.R. (1989b). Improving learning disabled students' skills at composing essays: Self-instructional strategy training. *Exceptional Children*, 56, 201-214.
- [8]. Graham, S., & Perin, D.(2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99, 445-476.
- [9]. Harris, K.R., & Graham, S. (1996). Making the writing process work: Strategies for composition and self-regulation. Cambridge, MA: Brookline.(*)
- [10]. Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates. (2002). A statement of competencies of students entering California's public colleges and universities. Sacramento, CA.
- [11]. Jones, B.F. & Idol, L. (Eds), 1990. *Dimensions of thinking and Cognitive Instruction*. NJ: Erlbaum.
- [12]. National Commission on Writing (2004, September). *Writing: A ticket to work or a ticket out : A survey of business leaders*. Retrieved September 18 2011, from <http://www.writingcommission.org/report/html>
- [13]. National Commission on Writing (2005, July). *Writing: A powerful message from state government*. Retrieved September 18 2011, from <http://www.writingcommission.org/report/html>
- [14]. Westwood, P. Learning and Learning Difficulties: A Hand Book for Teachers, University of Hong Kong, Acerpress.
- [15]. Zimmerman, B.J., & Martinez-Pons, M.(1986). Development of a structured interview for assessing student use of self-regulated learning strategies. *American Educational Research Journal*, 23, 614-628.
- [16]. Zimmerman, B.J., & Risemberg, R.(1997). Becoming a self-regulated writer: A social cognitive perspective. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 22, 73-101.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Maruthi Kumari Vaddapalli has a PhD in English Phonetics from the English and Foreign Languages University. She has been teaching English for the last 14 years in India, Africa and Oman. Her research interests are Phonetics and Phonology, Writing Strategy Instruction and Bilingual Teaching.



Ms. Helen Woerner is from the United States of America who has a Masters Degree in TESOL. She has been teaching English in Saudi Arabia, United States and Oman for over 30 years. Her research interests are Materials and Methods for ELT.