

The Use of Leading Questions as a Technique to Generate Relevant Ideas in Writing

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Abstract— *Different studies have stressed the importance of the prewriting stage in the writing process. Regarding the various difficulties students face in the prewriting stage, a lot of research has been conducted in order to question the usefulness of specific prewriting strategies. In this respect, the aim of the present paper is to examine the effectiveness of the use of leading question as a brainstorming strategy to generate relevant ideas. An experiment was used to test the effectiveness of the treatment on second year back students (k12) abilities to generate relevant ideas for subsequent writing task. The design of this experiment was a pre-test post-test. The participants were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. Although the findings have shown that there has been an improvement in students' ability to generate relevant ideas in the post test, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant.*

Keywords— *EFL, brainstorming.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the basic skills EFL learners should develop regarding both its major impact on the academic achievement of students and its importance as a communication skill. However, it remains the most difficult skill not only to learn but to teach as well. There are a lot of problems that hinder high school students' writing abilities. Some of these problems are related to the complex nature of the skill itself, others can be attributed to learners, textbooks, teachers, or to the lack of a clear method of teaching writing. In this paper, the focus is on students' inability to generate relevant and appropriate ideas related to writing on a given topic. It is about the difficulties students encounter at the prewriting stage before they start to write.

Moroccan high school students are said to lack the ability to generate relevant appropriate ideas in writing a given topic in English. This problem, we believe, is the main obstacle that may hinder students' writing development. In this respect, and on the basis of our experience with students' reactions to carrying out certain previous writing tasks, the learners relate this difficulty to their inability to come up with relevant appropriate ideas. This led us to closely investigate this problem in the current

research. Hence, the purpose of the present paper is to test the effectiveness of a technique we tend to introduce and which we believe would help our students overcome the obstacle of generating relevant and appropriate ideas in their writing on a given topic. This technique involves asking leading questions and using the elicited answers as a support to the note-taking strategy during the prewriting stage to assist students come up with relevant ideas to improve their writing on that given topic. Before going any further, it remains necessary to go through literature in order to establish a theoretical ground for the current study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research on writing has concluded that the process approach to teaching writing is beneficial. According to Smith as cited in O'Mealia (2011), in the process approach, the emphasis has shifted from creating a product to the current of writing as a process. Writers go through different stages to accomplish a writing task. Although researchers use different terms to refer to these stages, the latter mainly include prewriting, drafting, and post-writing. All these stages are crucial. However, the focus in this study is on the prewriting phase. In this regard, Jasmine & Weiver (2007), Rao (2007), and Gibson (2008) argue that while all these stages are crucial for developing a meaningful piece of writing, prewriting/planning is the first stage in which students spend most of their time discovering how they will write.

Different studies have examined the effect of process writing and have found evidence of the importance of using the writing process (Baroudy, 2008) and (Towel & Matanzo, 2010). In this review the focus is on the studies that are relevant to the concerns of this paper. In other words, our focus is on the studies that have dealt with the effect of prewriting strategy on the development of students' writing abilities. Writers refer to different strategies before they start a writing task. Writers plan their writing task using brainstorming, POW (Plan Organize Write), and graphical representations. Since this study is about the use of leading questions as a technique to generate relevant ideas as a brainstorming activity, our review of literature is restricted to the studies that have

examined the effectiveness of some brainstorming activities and strategies in planning and organizing a writing task.

For most students, one of the toughest parts of writing is thinking about what to write. According to Rao (2007), many students complain that they lack ideas or they cannot think of anything interesting or significant to write about. Rao (2007) argues that brainstorming, either by themselves or by peers, helps to get their imagination running. In this study Rao examines both the effectiveness of brainstorming and students attitudes towards this strategy. It has been found that 86 % of the respondents to the questionnaire report that they have benefited from brainstorming. The findings of Rao (2007) are consistent with the findings of Jacobs (2004), Read (2005) and Williams (2011).

Although these studies were conducted in different contexts and in different ways, all the mentioned authors conclude that having students brainstorm before they begin to write show positive effects on their writing. Most of the gains occur at the level of organization, structure, length, and details added. Rao (2007) reports that there is a strong relation between writing and thinking. Brainstorming encourages and invites students to think about the topic. It is through this strategy that we give students the opportunity to think and activate their prior knowledge and skills to apply in the writing task. All these studies were conducted in different environments, and all researchers chose to do brainstorming in groups or in pairs. Jacobs (2004), Read (2005) and Williams (2011) conducted interactive writing sessions in which the teachers modeled how to brainstorm. As teachers demonstrate how to think aloud, students were able to share their ideas and listen to others (these teachers argue for the use of brainstorming in groups with arguments from Sociocultural Learning Theory).

Based on the review which highlights the importance of process writing as well as the fundamental role of the prewriting stage, our research question focuses on whether there is an effect of the technique suggested (using the leading questions and note taking as a pre-writing strategy) on the development of the students' ability to generate relevant and appropriate ideas in writing a given topic. As a tentative answer to the research questions, and based on previous studies in the field of action research, we assume that there is no effect of the independent variable (the technique suggested) on the dependent variable (students' ability to generate ideas) as long as the treatment is not introduced. Therefore, a research project has been conducted at El Fath High School in Khemisset, Morocco to closely delve into the problem.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants in the current study were second year baccalaureate arts students. They were at more or less the same level of proficiency. The participants were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group consists of students of class 1 and the second group consists of students of class 2. We randomly assigned these classes to control and experimental groups: class 1 being the control group and class 2 being the experimental group, knowing that the experimental group is the one which receives the treatment/ the suggested technique to be implemented as a pre-writing activity, while the control group is the one which receives no treatment.

It has to be noted that all the students from the two groups were taught by the same teacher and were exposed to the same teaching material (The textbook Gateway 2). Tests were used as a means to collect data to answer the research question and to test the research hypothesis. These tests involve a pre-test and a post-test.

The purpose of the pre-test was to ensure that the two groups were more or less at the same level in terms of generating relevant and appropriate ideas in writing on a given topic. In this test, students were given a familiar topic related to their everyday life and in which they were asked to write an email to an English or American friend about a birthday party they were invited to. The time allotted to the writing task was between 25 and 30 minutes. The scoring criteria used during the correction stage focused on meaning rather than form. We adopted the same scoring criteria used for marking the baccalaureate national exam with a special focus on relevance of content, appropriateness and variety of vocabulary and composition organization but with less emphasis on accuracy criteria like grammar, punctuation and capitalisation. We purposefully opted to give more priority to the first three criteria (8 /10 points). It was hoped that the results of this test would ensure that there is no significant difference between the two groups before they receive any treatment.

As for the post-test, it was introduced immediately after the treatment. It was a written test which aimed at testing students' ability to generate relevant ideas on a different topic (why do teenagers in your age generally disagree with their parents?). Like the pre-test, the post-test was used to test the research hypothesis and answer the research question. That test was the tool used to enable us to judge the effectiveness of the treatment/ the technique in helping the students achieve the desired goal. Our judgement was done through comparing the performance of the participants in the post-test. The most appropriate statistical procedure (t-test) was used to analyse the data collected (the data collected determined the type and the value of the t- test to be used). As far as the correction

stage is concerned, we followed the same process and adopted the same scoring criteria used in the pre-test to evaluate students' writings.

IV. THE RESULTS

This section aims to present the findings of this action research. It mainly includes two sub sections. The first section is devoted to presenting the pre-test results while the second one is reserved to the post test results.

The Pre-test results

The purpose of the pre test is to make sure that the two groups constitute homogenous groups as far as their ability to generate relevant ideas. Table 1 shows the results obtained from the pre-test.

Table1

Pre test result

	N	X	SD	P.05
Control	27	3.51	2.88	N.S
Experimental	34	3.29	2.06	

The T-Test, as an appropriate statistical procedure used by scholars in the field for this kind of data, shows that the difference between the experimental and the control group is not significant. The difference that might be noticed in the means of the two groups (3.51 and 3.29) is quite normal.

According to Hatch & Lazaraton (1991), the required value needed to reject the null hypothesis (Ho), in case where the difference between the two groups is significant, should be equal or more than 2.021. In this case study, the obtained T-value is 0.785, which is not enough to reject the hypothesis. Therefore, we can conclude that there is no significant difference between the two groups as far as their ability to generate relevant and appropriate ideas in writing is concerned.

The post-test results

The purpose of this test was to examine the performance of the participants in the study after the treatment. The results of this test were used to judge the effectiveness of the technique suggested to enhance the students' ability to come up with relevant appropriate ideas. The T-test was used to analyse the scores of the students in this test. Table 2 illustrates the analysis of the post-test results:.

Table 2

Post test results

	N	X	SD	P.05
Control	37	9.40	4.02	N.S
Experimental	37	11	4.20	

The results of the post-test show that the difference between the control and the experimental group remains

normal. This can be justified by the fact that the t-obs is lower than the t needed (t- critical) to conclude that there is a significant difference between the two groups.

The T-observed value is only 1.66 while the value needed to show significance is 2.00. This can lead us to conclude that the technique suggested does not have a significant effect on the development of students' ability to generate relevant appropriate ideas in writing. However, a comparison of the means of the two groups in the pre and post-test (table 3) may indicate some improvement in the performance of the experimental group.

Table 3

	Pre test mean	Post test mean
Control group	3.51	9.40
Experimental group	3.29	11

The obtained results are discussed in the following section.

V. IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Although there is no effect of the suggested technique on the students' ability to generate relevant and appropriate ideas in writing on a given topic and despite the fact that the experimental group did not seem to benefit much from the treatment, It is slightly apparent that on the basis of the means obtained from the scores of the pretest and post-test, there is a slow improvement in the students' writings though the T value obtained in the post test was not enough to say that there is an effect of the suggested treatment. This may imply that more time is needed for that treatment to have greater effect. Further, the reports and discussions of the findings of the current research project in the two in-service training sessions held by the inspectorate of English in the region (Academy of Rabat, Morocco) were very fruitful in the sense that they allowed us to reconsider our project and introduce the suggested changes. This, undoubtedly paves the way to further action research in the near future with new prospects. Another reason that may account for the lack of a significant statistical difference in the post test may be related to the fact that the learners were not that familiar with the strategy. This may also imply that the participants in the test did not have an opportunity to notice a modeling of the suggest technique. Another reason can be related to the fact that the students did not know how to appropriately use the strategy as a new brainstorming tool for them. The results of the study can also be justified by an inadequate implementation of the process approach to teaching writing due to lack of systematic training for effective classroom practice. Some

teachers may avoid using process writing as it demands more preparation, time, and investment. Another implication of the current study is related to the complexity of writing. Writing is very demanding.

The results of this action research push us to raise some points that may affect not only the development of EFL learners writing abilities but their learning of English as a foreign language. These factors can be related to the lack of clear methods to teaching writing. Since English is a foreign language in Morocco, differences between students L1 and English can also have an impact.

One of the limitations of the present research is that no random selection has been done on the population under study. Another weakness is the Limited number of participants, which will not allow us to generalize the findings of the study and extend them to all EFL students in Morocco. More importantly is the time limit of the study which was not sufficient enough to account for the treatment to have the desired effect. Another limitation might be related to research instruments; this means that the findings would be more reliable if different research instruments such as questionnaires and interviews to both teachers and students were employed. We also believe that using observing checklists can provide more details about the writing process each learner go through. Therefore, future research is expected to consider these limitations for a better understanding of the complex issue of writing. Further research need to be directed towards exploring other strategies in the prewriting stage in particular and the other phases of the writing process. Another issue that should be addressed is the study of other effects of these strategies especially motivation and self-confidence of students to compose a text.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the effectiveness of using leading questions as a pre-writing strategy to help students generate relevant ideas. Based on the experiment done to test the effectiveness of this strategy as a treatment, the results of the study do not show a significant statistical difference in the performance of the participants especially in the post-test. Such findings can be related either to the limited time of the treatment or to the insufficient training of students to use this technique. Despite the limited effect of the treatment, it is assumed that the present paper has partly highlighted the importance of process writing (especially the pre-writing stage) in motivating students to write. Thus, further research is needed to verify the usefulness of other pre-writing strategies including the use of leading questions as a brainstorming technique.

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