Pre-writing Techniques in the Writing Process for the L2 Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated pre-writing techniques in the learning process to improve written communication skills of learners using qualitative research methods. This study was performed in a public school, Suphi Öner Primary School in Turkey, in Mersin. Students were seventh grade class that their level was pre-intermediate. This class was made up of twenty students. It took three weeks, the students' samples, drawings and blogs were documented by the students. In order to examine the results, 6+1 Trait Analytical Model for assessing and teaching writing was used. The study found that the pre-writing techniques improved students study skills of free writing in terms of organization, but the same strategy had no effect on the students' conventions/mechanics. Additionally, their writing seems to be honest, appealing, and written from heart that showed us motivation and enthusiastic of them. The students improved topics in an enlightening way that makes a point and tells a story. The pre- and post-study writing samples showed an increase in my students' motivation for writing. In the pre-study survey, 75% of the students were motivated about it, while the post-study survey showed 96% of the students motivated. It was apparent that they were thoroughly enjoying and developing their writing while they created their own blogs.

1. Introduction

Writing in second language (L2) classrooms always creates a challenging atmosphere, especially for the beginners and intermediate levels. All students face the dilemma of looking at a blank computer screen or paper without having any idea of how to translate their thoughts into a coherent and carefully articulated essay. Even with a clear prompt, a grasp on the material, and lots of ideas getting started on any paper can be a challenge. The ability to write is considered essential as a means of developing overall L2 capabilities, especially by strengthening the vocabulary and grammar skills encountered in reading and listening activities (Reichelt, 2005). Moreover, it is an important skill to reinforce language, content, culture and literacy in a second language. However, writing in second language classrooms is often viewed merely as a way of completing homework assignment (Lally, 2000). But, it begins with motivation and awareness. Students find motivation especially difficult, that's why it does not go beyond homework assignments. As pointed out by Lally (2000), writing in second language is ignored and this gap is most visible when students arrive at higher level courses and struggle with writing assignments that require them to address content in addition to mechanics and vocabulary.

Kroll (cited in McKee, 1981) emphasizes that without prewriting guidance, students launch into ideas that they may have trouble expressing due to limitations of linguistic forms. Prewriting techniques help get ideas on paper, though not usually in an organized form and brainstorm thoughts that might eventually make way into writing. If you decided to build yourself a house, you probably would not begin by going to the lumberyard and loading your truck full of lumber, bricks, and nails. There is a lot of work to do before you get to this point, including the drawing up of plans for what you want to build and the determining of the building supplies that you will need. In a way, the same general idea applies to writing essays. We use the term "prewriting" to refer to the work you do on your essay before you actually begin writing a draft of it.

As a teacher, lecturing in a public school, Suphi Öner Primary School, for two years, I have observed the common problem about writing, especially how they begin to write. I targeted my seventh grade class that their level is pre-intermediate for my research. This class is made up of twenty students. Therefore, the aim of this action research is to explore prewriting techniques for pre-intermediate students. At this stage in the research, prewriting activities will be generally defined as activation, students' latent skills in jumpstarting the writing process. Thus, the following question was raised in this study-

What is the role of the prewriting techniques to develop written communication skills of students?

2. Methodology

Action research generally involves inquiring into one's own practice through a process of self-monitoring that generally includes entering a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on an issue or problem in order to improve practice. Within second language education, action research has usually been associated with the study of classroom actions rather than addressing social problems associated with language teaching. It is conducted by practising language teachers because they themselves are valuable sources of knowledge regarding their own classroom situations and as a result change can be implemented more credibly because practising teachers will find the results more credible and valid for their needs.

I used action research because I wanted to change my practice. We know that the most

important aspect of action research is that the process enhances teachers' professional development through fostering of capability. I concerned that things about writing did not go as my wish in my classrooms. The aim was to bring about development in my practice by analysing writing practice and identifying elements for change. My research is based on a three-week observation of using data generated by students' writing samples, drawings and blogs. The students' samples, drawings and blogs were documented by the students themselves and by my own observations. These methods' appropriateness depends on the key evaluation questions in my research. The questions about how students used pre-writing techniques and if the advantages and disadvantages have clearly been seen provided appropriateness of this method. We can answer this question with these methods. Of course, there are advantages and disadvantages to each of these forms of data collection and it is most important that the information collected is reliable in that the procedures are used to measure accurately what they claim to measure.

3. Data Collection

I conducted the study in three different ways so as to collect data about my research question. One of the instruments was the writing samples method which took three weeks. After I explained the basic principles of the pre-writing techniques to my students, I planned to give a piece of paper and an ordinary topic to students so as to write, I tried to investigate the students' writing papers regularly and took some notes regarding the organization that is clear, logical and flowing of their paper. The students wrote a new kind of composition every lesson. At the end of the lesson, I gave the same topic to students and they wrote again but with using techniques to be learned. Every day, students performed and studied one pre-

writing technique in detail. The other method is the students' drawings that helped me understand how they used it correctly. The limitation of this method was that it cannot be used in every activity. For KWL and flowcharts techniques, I gathered only drawings also writing samples. For brainstorming and free writing techniques I gathered only writing samples. The use of writing samples method and drawings depended on the day what I taught. Three weeks later, I wanted from them to create their own blog using both writing samples and drawings according to the week's topic. During a brainstorming session, students were given a topic and they generated a list of words or phrases and I guided, if necessary, by steering students towards ideas and vocabulary. Another technique was to draw a picture relating to the assigned topic on a sheet of blank paper providing as much details as possible, such as location or time elements. In the KWL chart, the students wrote whatever they knew (k), what they wanted to learn (w) and they learnt or still needed to learn (L) about the assigned topic. In the case study, the last stage in data collection involved collecting two pieces of graded compositions from each student that included the students' corrections. One of the compositions completed before the action research project started, and the other composition was the most recently assigned when the action research began. While collecting the writing samples, the action research began o serve as evidence for the comparison of what the students did before with what they did after. In addition, I used student interest survey for purpose of triangulation in this study by using mixed research methods. All interactions were recorded during the action research project in order to get the best understanding of the issue under investigation.

4. Analysis of Data and Findings

In order to examine the results, 6+1 Trait Analytical Model for assessing and teaching writing was used. The rubric is made up of 6+1 key qualities that define strong writing from which three elements were chosen. The scales method, of which the 6+1 Traits model is an example, employs sets of criteria to evaluate pieces of work. We also point to the advantage of using the 6-Trait model to diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses of student writing in order to inform instruction and improve overall writing in the classroom. The results showed that the pre-writing techniques improved students study skills of free writing in terms of organization, but the same strategy had no effect on the students' conventions/mechanics. My informal observations noted that the students were more prepared for their compositions after the implementation of the pre-writing techniques. When I analyzed the data, the results were not surprising. Their paper was clear and focused; most of them were successful to go from general observations to specify. Details seemed to fit where they are placed; sequencing was logical and effective for most of the students. Furthermore, the important point was the writing seems to be honest, appealing, and written from heart that showed us motivation and enthusiastic of them. The students improved topics in an enlightening way that makes a point and tells a story. This point helps students develop written communication skills.

There were some problems about grammatical accuracy (conventions) as mentioned. Grammar and usage were incorrect in some parts; however, this problem did not distort meaning. Punctuation was accurate but paragraphs sometimes run together and began in the wrong places. Also, I noticed that some compositions were repetitious because of lack of vocabulary knowledge.

Utilizing pre-writing techniques can help elevate a writing assignment beyond a vocabulary practice exercise and allow students to delve deeper into the personal connections that they have with the topic assigned, thus allowing themselves to make the final product more communicative in nature and foster acquisition of their L2 (Kramsch, 1993; Strasma & Foster, 1992).

The pre- and post-study writing samples showed an increase in my students' motivation for writing. In the pre-study survey, 75% of the students were motivated about it, while the post-study survey showed 96% of the students motivated. It was apparent that they were thoroughly enjoying and developing their writing while they created their own blogs. When students read a passage, such as a passage detailing various points-of-view that students could use a flowchart to track the different viewpoints. Flow charts provided an ideal guide and a visual representation of how the paper would proceed. Furthermore, the KWL chart is an excellent tool to help students find where they stand in regards to their knowledge of topic (Vacca &Mrazz, 2000). They provided students with a framework to identify patterns and organize ideas.

Sometimes students need the opportunity to talk about their ideas before they begin their writing task (Freeman, 2001). Brainstorming activity completed its mission successfully in my classroom. However, there was something wrong from my point because of lack of experience about it. I ignored accepting every word from the students. The following figure is a KWL chart of one of my students.
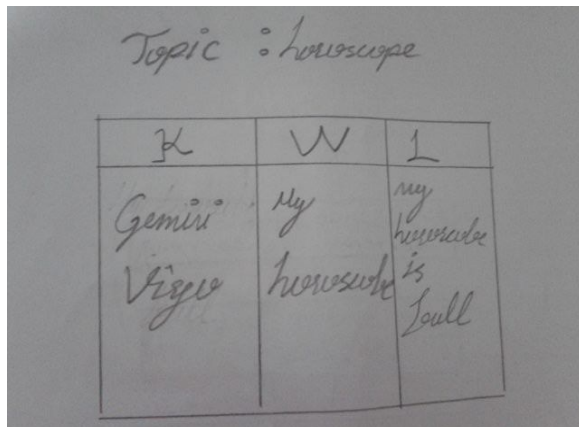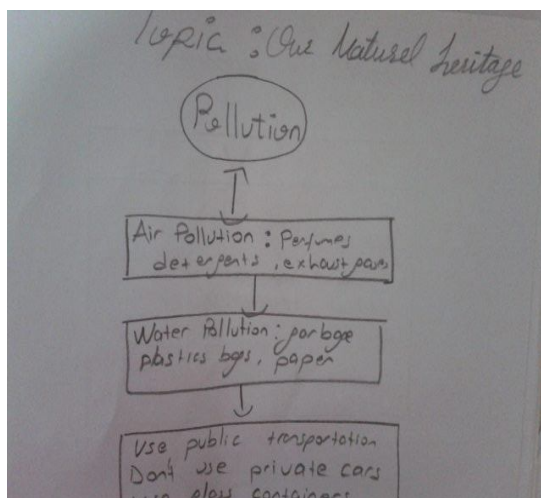
Figure 1 – An example to the KWL Chart

Figure 2 – An example to the flowchart

5. Conclusion

The findings of this action research showed that pre-writing techniques helped students with study skills and improved their written communication skills. The poorest students were helped the most. They seemed to gain a sense of control over their action as evidenced by their comments such as- "I put more effort", "I studied more", "I put more details''. Regardless of how a teacher may see the process, pre-writing process can be implemented as an effective tool in the L2 classrooms. Pre-writing suggests that the process should take place at the beginning of writing process, but as an important point, teachers should encourage students to use this technique whenever the students are stuck in his/her writing. Pre-

writing is a process of discovery, allowing for mistakes and mis-starts.

Since students need to acquire enough conventions and vocabulary, it is concluded that pre-writing activities are not a complete heal for writing assignments, such as making them perfect from the very start. They will, however, enable students to start a journey through the writing process with a better confidence where a stronger end product may possible be produced.

As a result of the data analysis, we can understand that level of the students has a vital importance on performing these techniques. For my students, four of these pre-writing techniques were quite enough but, as I saw with higher levels to study writing, we need to teach more techniques, such as clustering or narrative strips. I have learned about student learning to create figures or graphics add to the enjoyment. Students have learned with lots of fun considering their ages. The data analysis confirmed the effectiveness of the action I planned. Thus the methods I used to collect data makes my action research valuable by showing right sources.

In suggestion, the discoveries I made effected my practice positively. I recommend that a time limit needs to be given for a pre-writing activity so as to encourage students to focus their thoughts on the topic at hand. The limit depends on the type of the pre-activity which is generally short. Another point is about students' weaknesses. Students should have background knowledge about syntax and enough vocabulary knowledge in order not to distort meanings. Generating vocabulary is useful for their writing, we can provide with small group activities. Last of all, with enough encouragement, students will begin to use these techniques on their own, regardless of where they may be in the writing process.

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Gülşah Geyimci holds Master's degree from Çağ University, in Mersin, Turkey in English Language Education. She works as an Instructor at Beykent University. She has been teaching English to kids in the kindergarten; young learners in the state school; and adult learners in Ukraine with Global English Company for four years.

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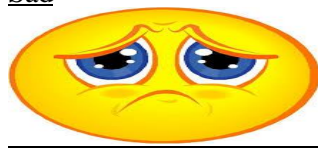
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Appendix: 1

Student Interest Survey

1. How does it make you feel when you write at school ?

Happy	Bored	Embarrassed
I am Nervous	Sad	Excited

2. What do you like to write about ?

Sports	Fairy tales	Yourself	Animals

| Friends | Fruits | Vacation | I   like

Hobbies |
|---|---|---|---|
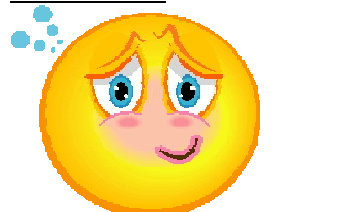
3. Do you think you are a good writer?   4. Do you wish you were better at writing?

| Yes | No
X | Yes
X | No |
|---|---|---|---|

Appendix: 2 Student Interest Survey

1. How does it make you feel when you write at school ?

Happy	Bored	Embarrassed
Nervous	Sad	I am

Excited |

2. What do you like to write about ?

Sports	Fairy tales	Yourself	Animals

Friends	Fruits	Vacation	I like
			Hobbies

3. Do you think you are a good writer?   4. Do you wish you were better at writing?

Yes X	No	Yes X	No