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The Role of Formal Schemata in the Development of Précis Writing in an Iranian EFL Context

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Abstract

Background knowledge and learners’ familiarity with formal schematic knowledge is of primary importance for EFL learners in writing an acceptable summary. Schema theory can help instructors focus on the discrepancy between the prior knowledge and experience that students bring to the learning task and the skills that are needed to successfully carry out and complete the particular learning task. The objective of this research is to explore the role of formal schemata in the development of EFL learners’ précis writing; therefore, it is hypothesized that familiarity with the formal schematic knowledge of the texts will result in better performances of the EFL learners in précis writing. To answer the proposed question, two classes were chosen in Tabriz Islamic Azad University, each comprising 40 English majors, one as a control group and the other as an experimental group. The control group received no special treatment, while the experimental group received the treatment which was familiarization with formal schematic knowledge of the texts. The findings of the study indicated clearly that the experimental group learners performed better in their précis than the control group. The drawn implication of this study was that not all of the writing problems of the students were due to the lack of needed formal schemata but that, the existent schemata must be activated by the help of the teacher to improve the writing process.

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1. Introduction

"In terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language" (Nunan, 1999, p.271). Writing plays an important role in our personal and professional lives, thus, it has become one of the essential components of university English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curricula (Palmira, 2001). "It is generally believed that writing is the most demanding skill among the four. Native speakers of different languages are usually incapable of writing fluently and accurately in their own languages without receiving proper instruction" (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 1999, p.100). Writing is generally regarded as a difficult skill. This is often attributed to its inherently complex characteristics which according to Wall (1981, p.53) "range from mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic conventions and various mysterious factors in between. As Pilis (1993) mentions, writing is a one-sided communication with all the burden of interaction relying mostly on linguistic elements which indicates that writing is indeed a deliberate and demanding activity. It requires conscious work on the part of the writer, who besides having to accommodate his own thought, has to be competent in all the written aspects of a language, from mechanics to discourse. A précis is a shortened version of someone else's writing or thoughts (Bleck, 2001). The ability to write an effective précis might be the most important writing skill a college student can possess. The goal of summarizing material is to pass along the ideas belonging to another. This process is done with fewer words than the original to save the reader the work of going to that document. What is of great importance in this task is to maintain the integrity of the original document: not distorting the original views, ideas, attitudes, or their importance in the original (Bleck, 2001). Writing is a two-step process. First the meaning is figured out and then it is put into language. If we apply this principle to the précis writing task, we can break the task down into the following processes: (1) comprehension of the original text, (2) ability to select or differentiate main ideas from supporting details and inconsequential information in the original text, (3) transformation of these main ideas into the learner's written text, and (4) the adoption of the appropriate academic writing conventions (Hidi & Anderson, 1986). The ability to write an effective précis might be the most important writing skill a college student can possess. The goal of summarizing material is to pass along the ideas belonging to another. This process is done with fewer words than the original to save the reader the work of going to that document. What is of great importance in this task is to maintain the integrity of the original document: not distorting the original views, ideas, attitudes, or their importance in the original.

According to Carrell (1983) readers’ mental stores, termed schemata, are divided into three main types: content schemata, formal schemata and linguistic schemata, each of which can affect the reading comprehension skill and the text production in return. While formal schemata cover discourse level items, linguistic or language schemata include the decoding features needed to recognize words and how they fit together in a sentence (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Both types of schematic knowledge, content-based and text-based, are drawn upon in interpreting and comprehending an academic text. The novice ESL/EFL student often lacks both types of schemata, content-based and text-based, and hence has difficulty comprehending the text. The reader’s knowledge of text organizational structure plays an important role in comprehending a text, and the identification and use of an organizational plan of a text can lead to more effective understanding and consequently to a better writing (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). Readers’ expectations about the genre of a text influence the way that a text is processed and represented in memory and expert readers typically activate the appropriate reading goals for each discourse genre. Both types of schematic knowledge, content-based and text-based, are drawn upon in interpreting and comprehending an academic text. Recognizing the rhetorical structuring of a text would make the text more accessible to the receiver, which is the communicative purpose of language exchange. Various studies in both L2 and foreign language show that text organization affects reading comprehension and writing ability in turn.
2. Methodology

Two classes were chosen in Tabriz Islamic Azad University, each comprising 40 English majors, one as a control group and the other as an experimental group. The control group received no special treatment, while the experimental group received the treatment which was familiarization with formal schematic knowledge of the texts. The instruments which were used in this study, were a kind of pre-test followed by a post-test in which the subjects of both groups were asked to write the summaries of some given comprehension texts without getting any instruction about formal schematic structures of the texts, namely genre type, topic sentence, controlling idea, major and minor supports, discourse markers which had created cohesion in the selected texts and the coherence and meaningfulness of the texts. The only difference of the post-test stage was the familiarity of the experimental group subjects with the formal schematic structures of the texts taught by the teacher. After gathering all the scored papers of both groups at pre-test and post-test stages, the scores were analyzed and compared, the processes of which are presented in the following section, in order to find out if there were any significant and meaningful differences between the two groups’ performances in précis writing.

3. Results

Because of the limited number of the subjects in this study, the chosen operation was t-test which was used to make a comparison between the two means of the groups, both at pre-test and post-test stages. Thus, in order to use the t-test for pre-test and post-test results of the written précis of both groups, first the mean scores and standard deviations were calculated which has been summed up as follows:

| Table 1. Mean scores and Standard Deviations of Control and Experimental Groups on Pre-test |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|
|                                   | $\bar{X}$ | $N$ | $SD$   |
| Control Group                    | 12.5        | 30   | 13.03 |
| Experimental Group               | 12.65       | 30   | 13    |

Then the t-test calculations were done to find out the observed t-value for both control and experimental groups at the pre-test stage. To find out the observed t-value for both groups, the degree of freedom and the t-critical were found. It needs clarification here that the chosen t-critical values were from the two-tailed tests’ level of significance and the reason was the presence of a control and an experimental group, so they were computed at the 0.05 level. What it means is that we can be sure that more than 95 times out of 100 the same results will be exhibited for a similar sample from the population. The final t-value of the t-test application at pre-test stage was 0.04 at 0.05 level of significance. Since the observed t-value was smaller than the t-critical at 0.05 level of significance with df =58 for two-tailed studies, it was implied that no significant difference existed between the means of the groups at pre-test stage before getting any treatment. At the post-test stage also, first the mean scores and standard deviations were computed as tabulated in the following table:

| Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Control and Experimental Groups on Post-test |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                   | $\bar{X}$ | $N$ | $SD$   |
| Control Group                    | 11           | 30   | 11.25     |
| Experimental Group               | 19.25        | 30   | 19.5       |

Later the t-test calculations were done as in the case of pre-test and the observed t-value was 2.06 at the 0.05 level of significance. Considering the great amount of the observed t-value at the 0.05 level of significance with
df = 58, it could be claimed that the existent difference between the means at the post-test stage was not due to chance but because of the positive role of the given treatment that was creating familiarity with the formal schematic knowledge. Thus, the null hypothesis which stated no relationship between the formal schematic knowledge of the learners and their précis writing ability was rejected. It was clear that when the null hypothesis could be rejected, the directional one which claimed the direct effect of formal schemata on the development of summary writing would be accepted as the result of this experiment.

4. Discussion

Writing is one of these basic communication skills and is a unique asset in the process of learning a second or foreign language. Unlike listening and speaking which can be developed without direct instruction, reading and writing as two closely connected skills require special kinds of instruction about the mechanics of the text that refer to letter/sound recognition and discrimination, basic rules of spelling, punctuation and capitalization as well as the recognition of whole sentences and paragraphs (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 1999). Unlike some teachers who ignore the importance of subjects' familiarity with the textual schemata, Carrell (1985) illustrated that familiarity with formal schemata is as important as the content schemata in comprehension and production of written texts. The past decade has witnessed a major paradigm shift in composition theory and research. The emphasis has moved from the product approach to the process of writing, which in the former the focus was on the final written paper while in the latter the main focus was on how the student writes his/her paper with regard to the text structure including the topic sentence, comment, supports, conclusion, generic type and other factors. Considering all the benefits of becoming familiar with the formal schemata in facilitating the writing process, in this study the researchers set out to investigate the effect of formal schemata in the development of summary writing as a sub skill of writing skill in an EFL context. The main purpose of this study was to evoke the instructors' awareness to implement formal schemata teaching in their summary writing syllabuses. The underlying hypothesis was that familiarity with formal schematic knowledge is in close connection to the development of précis writing process and would result in better production of the précis. Considering the resultant outcomes of the present study, there is no doubt in the correspondence of the findings of this study to what has been found in the previous researches, all of which endorsed the positive role of the formal schemata in the developmental cycle of précis writing in EFL contexts. What the present study can suggest is that writing skill with all its sub skills, one of which is précis writing, can be improved and become interactive via different ways, one of which is familiarity with the text structure or the formal schematic knowledge. This kind of familiarity with the organizational structure of the texts provides the basic elements of précis writing for the subjects. These elements are mostly ignored in EFL classes and writing skill is not valued as such. But it is worth mentioning that the more subjects become familiar with how to use text structures in précis writing, the more they will be able to make use of reading strategies like scanning and skimming and the better they will perform in writing courses.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Unlike the product approach the newer approaches, which are mostly process approach, contend that students learn how to write well by writing. One of the ways that students can make use of in learning how to write well is the précis writing process that the present study aimed at. This study took into account just one of the factors in developing the précis writing skill, namely formal schematic knowledge and it showed clearly that how schemata can be a useful tool to apply to the demands of the précis writing skill. It was found that those thirty students who got the treatment in this study and became aware of the text structures utilized this awareness along with their own background knowledge and performed better in their summaries than those who just made use of their background knowledge. It implies that exposure to organizational structures of the texts improves the learners' précis writing skill and at the same time prepares them to analyze any text on the basis of the texts structures and their formal schematic knowledge. However, none of the research findings are absolute. As teachers, we have to be flexible in selecting teaching techniques, as adhering rigidly to one approach will not solve all the problems of our students. Teachers have to be creative and sensitive to other variables such as the learners' needs, the situation of learning, etc. and try to modify their teaching methods according to the needs of the learners. As is true for all the teachers, the
writing teacher also need not be constrained by having to select any texts that he/she prefers, but teachers should take into account the students' likes and dislikes in choosing the texts. It is believed that some students' apparent reading and writing problems may be problems of insufficient background knowledge (Carrell, 1988b). But according to Carrell (1988a), these problems are not just caused by schema deficiencies and the relevant schemata must be activated. In other words, learners may come to a text with prior knowledge but their schemata are not necessarily activated while reading, so there seems the need for some activities provided by the teachers before the instruction starts.

The work of the teacher, then, when working with specific texts, should also involve helping learners to acquire the formal schemata that would help them to achieve the necessary text processing strategies to enable them to read efficiently and write well organized passages. In case of teaching précis writing the teacher should provide the learners with a brief description of what is a précis and explain them that the goal of writing a précis of an article, a chapter, a book or a reading passage is to offer as accurately as possible the full sense of the original, but in a more condensed form. The teacher should teach the learners about the fact that a summary restates the author's main point, purpose, intent and supporting details in brief, all of which are samples of formal schemata. The learners' familiarity with the main idea of the original passage and the supporting details facilitates their writing process to a great extent. The development of the ideas through paragraphs is another fact which needs instruction by the teacher if he/she wants the students to write a coherent piece of text. Foreign language learners need to know how to develop what they want to say in the paragraphs and should try to arrange their information in a logical order, for example, most to least important or in chronological order. During the experimental phase of this study, especially in pre-test stage, it was noticed that one of the big problems that EFL learners were faced while writing a précis was that because of their unfamiliarity with the formal schematic structures of the texts; their summaries were sometimes longer than the original text. So, it is strongly recommended that EFL teachers try to create this kind of familiarization before asking the learners to write the intended summaries. These are but a few implications that might be drawn from this study.

References