

A Discourse-based Teaching of Writing for Iranian EFL Students: A Systemic Perspective

Dr.Nader Assadi Aidinlou*

Assistant professor of Islamic Azad University, Ahar Branch

Abstract

The writing skill is often perceived as the most difficult language skill since it requires a higher level of productive language control than other skills (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). The present study introduced a discourse-based framework for the teaching of writing on the basis Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). To this end, 60 students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) were selected from among three different universities and assigned to experimental and control groups. All subjects were pre-tested for homogeneity, and then the experimental group was treated with SFL-oriented discourse knowledge for ten sessions with the non-treated group just receiving the traditional method of teaching writing. Following the treatment, a post-test was administered to the groups the results of which showed that there was a significant difference at $p < .05$ in the performance of the two groups on writing. It was concluded that the discourse-based teaching had a great effect on the writing of the Iranian TEFL majors.

Keywords: Discourse-based Teaching, Writing, Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL).

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*-Email: n-asadi@iau-ahar.ac.ir

1. Introduction

Writing in ESL and EFL, in particular, contexts has been challenging practitioners, teachers and students at different levels of English learning. To come up with a written product, Iranian English language learners at different levels, especially at high intermediate levels, rely on their prior knowledge of words and grammatical structures overlooking the socio-cultural factors involved in creating a written text. As a solution to this problem, it is necessary to acquaint the EFL students with an approach to writing that engages the students in a process whereby the creation of a text as a whole, not a scratch of sentences, is aimed at. This paper studies the impact of the teaching of SFL-oriented discourse knowledge, which incorporates both the text-level and sentence-level meaning resources, on the writing of the Iranian EFL students.

2. Literature Review

Writing has been and is still being researched by scholars from various areas like sociology, ethnography, rhetoric, computer and collaborative learning, of which the first three will be touched upon, with a detailed focus on sociological perspective as part of the theoretical framework for this study.

Based on the aim and purpose, writing can be organized as a referential, persuasive, literary or expressive rhetorical discourse (Kinneavy, 1969). A referential discourse emphasizes the subject matter; persuasive discourse puts an emphasis on the reader; literary discourse emphasizes the language; and an expressive discourse focuses on the writer. Furthermore, he distinguishes between means and ends in his determination of the differing discourse purposes contending that methods of developing a discourse such as comparison/contrast, definition and cause-effect are means, but explaining, arguing and exploring, for instance, are the aims.

Ethnographically, researchers enter a specific field to collect data through such techniques as case study, speak-aloud protocol or observation and to analyze the writing processes and practices in specific work-related and culture-related communities. This way, researchers observe students' writing behaviours in the process of writing to discover what they do and how they cope with a writing task. The results of a research study by Sommers (1980) reveal that the writing is not necessarily linear, and writers do not always plan, write and revise, but they use a recursive pattern, often going back to previous sentences and paragraphs to do editing, or surface changes, and revision, or text-based changes.

Being of social nature, writing is conditioned and shaped by the social and cultural context in which the writing process is performed. Reid (1993) cites Bizzel (1982) and Bruffee (1986) that any writing always develops in a relation to previous texts, contexts, situations and experiences. This awareness of writing situation in different contexts has developed into the concept of "discourse communities" (Faigley, 1985). The term discourse refers to multi-sentence chunks of language; a community is a group of people with similar values, aims, aspirations and expectations (Reid, 1993).

Following the social perspective on writing, this paper continues to borrow from SFL for its theoretical framework as well. Accordingly, language is used to do a function; it must be manipulated at the text level not at the sentence level solely; and it is can be interpreted and comprehended in the social context including context of situation and context of culture, referred to as register and genre respectively. As an instance of the context of culture, genre is viewed as a staged, goal-oriented social process (Martin, 1992). This statement implies that genres are made up of a number of stages, referred to as schematic structure or text structure, that each works separately to indicate transfer from one phase of the text to another phase in order to reach a social goal. In the same fashion, Swales (1990) describes genre as

writing in which there are constraints in writing and conventions in content, positioning, and form. On the other hand, register viewed as an instance of the context of situation, is configured by three inevitable factors; field, tenor and mode. Field refers to the subject matter about which the communication takes place; tenor points to the people of any social role and status participating in the communication; and mode refers to the channel via which messages are exchanged by the participants (Halliday, 1985).

In addition, language, based on SFL, consists of discourse-semantics and lexico-grammar levels. Discourse-semantics describes language from discursal and semantic perspectives. From discursal point of view, cohesion and coherence are of focal attention at the text level; and from semantic point of views three layers of meanings (ideational, interpersonal and textual) are investigated at the clause level. Cohesion refers to the logical and semantic relationships holding among various parts of a text by means of references, conjunctions and lexical relations. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), the interpretation of some parts of a text depends on the understanding of some other parts mentioned earlier or later in the body of the text or out of the text in the surrounding environment. Eggins (1994) maintains that coherence is either of generic type, which is produced as a result of the amalgamation of different functional stages of a genre; or of registerial type, which generated as a result of the togetherness of the three variables that are the integral part a register. On the other hand, lexico-grammar deals with the realization of the three metafunctions at the clause level. Ideational metafunction covers experiential meaning and logical meaning. Experiential meaning represents experiences, events and happenings in the outer or inner world and is textualized by a configuration of Process (encoded by verbs), Participant (encoded by nominal groups) and Circumstance (encoded by prepositional phrases), which together are referred to as a figure, and logical meaning which deals with the

logical relationships holding between two or more figures. Interpersonal meaning enacts social roles, statuses and relationships held by the people in the communicative event and is textualized through Subject (encoded by nominal groups), Finite (encoded by modal verbs) and Adjunct (encoded by prepositional phrases). And textual meaning is concerned with organizing the other two metafunctions in a message and is textualized by Theme (the element appearing in the initial position of a clause) and Rheme (the elements that follow the Theme).

Studies indicate that ESL and EFL, in particular, students follow similar patterns in the writing process but do everything less than native English speakers (Reid, 2001). Although the ability to write presupposes some level of morphological, lexical and syntactic as well as idiomatic knowledge, such knowledge alone does not guarantee the ability to write well because writing involves much more than constructing grammatical sentences. In other words, sentences need to be cohesive, that is, they have to be connected by cohesive devices in ways that can be followed by readers, and coherent, that is, various parts of the text have to work together conceptually in the particular rhetorical context (Silva & Matsuda, 2002). Furthermore, the evolving written product is viewed as discourse constantly changing to suit the writer's goals as well as the writer's need to accommodate potential readers (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). That is to say, four components must be taken into account in the writing process; the writer (or knower), the audience (or reader), reality (or context) and language of the written text (Johns, 1990). Birjandi et al. (2004) maintain that most Iranian students have problems in the writing skill that originate not only from macro-skills (grammar and vocabulary) but also from micro-skills (content and organization). The problem is that Iranian students attempt to represent the world through ideational meaning, and they ignore the other two meanings, that is, interpersonal meaning (the meaning about the relationship between

the writer and the reader) and textual meaning (the meaning that helps the readers navigate through the text). According to Silva (1993), second or foreign language writers have more difficulty setting up goals and organizing the written materials; therefore, it is important to provide the students with an effective instruction of writing as discourse constantly changing to suit the writer's purpose, the potential reader, the context in which the written text is created and the type of the language used to organize messages.

This research paper attempts to answer the following research question and test the hypothesis with regard to the explicit instruction of discourse knowledge as an independent variable and the writing as a dependent variable:

1- Is there any difference in the performance on the writing of the Iranian students who are given an explicit instruction of discourse knowledge and the Iranian students who are not?

H₀: There is no significant difference in the performance on the writing of the Iranian students who are given an explicit instruction of discourse knowledge and the Iranian students who are not.

3. Method

A non-equivalent control group design was devised to investigate the effectiveness of the explicit instruction of discourse knowledge on the writing of the Iranian students. To this end, a total of 60 undergraduate students majoring in English who had taken an advanced writing course at Islamic Azad University were recruited as a convenient sample for this study. The justification for choosing the advanced level for the present study comes from the fact that Iranian high intermediate EFL learners require explicit structural and discursal knowledge to cope up with the meaning resources at the local and global levels of texts (Lotfipour-Saedi, 2006; Yaghchi, 2000). This fact is advocated by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), Grabe (1986) and Grabe and Stoller (2002), who believe that all

second and foreign language learners, especially at intermediate and high intermediate levels, need explicit instruction of structural knowledge and discursal knowledge. Of 60 subjects, three subjects (two from the experimental group and one from the control group) dropped the course, and another three (one from the experimental group and two from the control group) were eliminated from the study by the researcher as a result of frequent absences from the class. As such, the remaining sample who accompanied the researcher until the end of the experiment was 54 subjects comprising 42 females and 12 males aged between 21 and 32 from different parts of Iran.

Having got ascertained of the homogeneity of the two groups in the writing skill through the administration of pre-test, the researcher treated the experimental group with SFL-oriented discourse knowledge for ten two-hour sessions. The treatment was conducted in three steps each based on a four-stage teaching-learning cycle (Hammond, et al., 1992) utilized in SFL pedagogy; that is, explicit description of the discourse knowledge, modeling, collective practice and individual practice. The first step included the explicit instruction of cohesive devices, that is, References, Conjunctions and Lexical Relations (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) for three sessions; the second step consisted of a two-session instruction of register, that is, Field, Tenor and Mode (Halliday, 1985); and the third step covered a formal teaching of five factual genres (Martin, 1985 & 1992) including exposition, exploration, report, description and discussion for five sessions. The control group was not given any special treatment and was just asked to write paragraphs and essays on different topic assigned by the researcher. At the end of the treatment, a post-test was administered to both groups in the long run.

The measuring instrument was composed of a writing test which was based on an IELTS reading passage taken out of Academic Module IELTS. The subjects were asked to read through an expository reading passage and write an essay about the same subject

matter without consulting the original reading material. The scoring (Appendix A) was conducted by two raters on the basis of the evaluation of the subjects' adherence to the schematic structure of the exposition genre at stake; that is, Thesis, Arguments, and Conclusion, on the one hand, and the sound argument of the ideas in a well-organized manner from the viewpoint of the passage writer, on the other hand, in the writing product. Each of these two dimensions was aligned with a five-point scale ranging from 1 to 5, each subjectively describing the subjects' performance on creating coherence in terms of the schematic structures making up the genre at issue, on the one hand, and in terms of the contextual factors making up the register at stake, on the other hand. The highest point, a '5', for the trait 'genre' has this descriptor: the writing, as a sample of an exposition text, observes the order, structure and presentation of information perfectly; it has an inviting introduction (or Thesis), clear discussion and logical transition of the main ideas (six Arguments) and a satisfying ending (or Conclusion). And the lowest point, a '1', has this descriptor: the writing, as a sample of exposition text, does not observe the order, structure and presentation of information; it has only an introduction (or Thesis), or one/two main ideas (or Arguments) or an ending (or Conclusion). Likewise, the highest point, a '5', for the trait 'register' has this descriptor: the writing, as a sample of exposition text, is clear and focused in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic; it bears a perfect and accurate discussion of the subject matter (Field), a well-organized sequence of all the available main ideas (Mode) and a fully impersonalized restatement of the topic from the passage writer's point of view (Tenor), and the descriptor for the lowest point, a '1', is: the writing, as a sample of exposition text, is very unclear and unfocused in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic; it only bears a sketchy mention of the subject matter (Field), and a poorly-

organized sequence of only one or two of the available main ideas (Mode) irrespective of the passage writer's point of view (Tenor).

In order to estimate the degree of the reliability of the two sets of scores given by two different raters, the Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was used. The computation showed that there was a significant relationship between the scores by the first rater and the second rater; that is to say, the inter-rater reliability of the two raters is considered high ($r > .7$). Moreover, the analysis of the correlations indicated that there was a positive relationship between the scores by the two raters in this sense that the subjects who obtained a high score from the first rater also received a high score from the second rater. After the test had been found to be reliable, it was checked for content validity through consultation with a panel of three experts from three different universities and for construct.

4. Data Analysis & Findings

The descriptive analysis of the post-test brought to light that the scores of the 27 subjects in the experimental group ranged between .50 and 3.25 with a mean of 1.78 and a standard deviation of .88. As for the descriptive analysis of the control group's post-test, the 24 subjects in this group gained a range of scores between .25 and 2.00 with a mean of 1.04 and a standard deviation of .64. Table 1 below illustrates the results of the descriptive statistics for both the pre-test and the post-test scores.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Pre- and Post-test

Group	Test	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Percentiles		
							25	50	75
EG	Pre-test	26	.25	2.50	1.09	.60	.68	1.00	1.50
	Post-test	27	.50	3.25	1.78	.88	1.00	1.75	2.50
CG	Pre-test	22	.25	1.75	.96	.43	.68	1.00	1.12
	Post-test	24	.25	2.00	1.04	.64	.25	1.00	1.68

To carry out the inferential statistics, the samples were checked for the underlying assumptions required for the choosing of an appropriate technique. The mere existence of the interval-scale writing scores and the presence of two independent groups removed any possibility of violation in the assumptions of the level of measurement and the independence of measurements respectively. In addition, the computation of the variances for the two groups through the Levene's test showed a non-significant value ($>.05$), which implies that equal variances are assumed. Furthermore, the samples were checked for the normality in the distribution of the scores in the pre-test and post-test through Kolmogorov-Smirnov test the results of which indicated non-significance value ($>.05$) for both groups in the pre-test and post-test in the sense that the distribution of the scores was normal in the samples. This value was .37 for the experimental group and .15 for the control group in the pre-test and .60 for the former group and .40 for the latter group in the post-test. As no violation was observed in the assumptions needed for the inferential analysis, parametric statistic was found to be the most appropriate statistical technique. As such, an independent-samples t-test was run to compare the mean scores between the experimental and control groups in the post-test, and a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores within the experimental group at the probability level $p<.05$.

The independent-samples t-test run to compare the mean scores for the experimental and control groups indicated that there was a significant difference in the scores for the experimental group ($M=1.78$, $SD=.88$) and the control group [$M=1.04$, $SD=.64$; $t(49)=3.40$, $p<.001$]. This was verified by the paired-samples t-test which was run to evaluate the effect of the treatment on the experimental subjects' mean writing scores. The results of this test showed a significant difference in the scores from Time 1 ($M=1.09$, $SD=.60$) to Time 2 [$M=1.82$, $SD=.87$; $t(25)= -3.07$, $p<.005$].

To make sure if this significant difference was caused by the intervention of the independent variable; viz, explicit instruction of systemic discourse-semantic knowledge, and not by chance alone, another paired-samples t-test was done to compare the non-treated control group's scores on the summary test at two different times at the probability level $p < .05$. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between the scores for the control group at Time 1 ($M = .93$, $SD = .43$) and Time 2 [$M = 1.20$, $SD = .58$; $t(19) = -1.94$, $p = .06$]. Table 2 below illustrates the findings from the inferential data analyses between and within the groups.

Table 2
Inferential Statistics of Between- and Within-Groups Mean Comparisons

		N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Experimental Group		27	1.78	.88	3.40**	49	.001
Control Group		24	1.04	.64			
Experimental Group	Time 1	26	1.09	.60	-3.07**	25	.005
	Time 2		1.82	.87			
Control Group	Time 1	20	.93	.43	-1.94	19	.06
	Time 2		1.20	.58			

** . Difference is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To sum up, the findings indicated that both experimental and control groups were, in the pre-test, almost homogeneous in terms of understanding the discursal relationships involved in the written text ($M_{EG} = 1.09$ and $M_{CG} = .96$), whereas in the post-test the experimental group had a better performance ($M_{EG} = 1.78$ and $M_{CG} = 1.04$). This difference in the performance of the groups was significant at the level $\alpha < .01$ in this sense that the difference between the two groups in the performance on the writing was attributable to the treatment not to the chance alone.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

No research studies have been done at this scale. However, the findings of this research are consistent with the findings of previous research studies (Carrell, 1992; Shokouhi & Amin, 2010) about the influence of the structure familiarity on reading and writing. The result of the research by Shokouhi and Amin (2010) showed that the students' familiarity with the context of a genre was an important factor in writing. They concluded that the rhetorical form as a significant phenomenon is more important than content in the organizing of top-level structure of a text and sequencing the events and temporal relationships among them. Moreover, the findings of this study are supported by the result of the studies conducted by and Zhang (2008) as to the role of the formal schema on writing. These two separate research studies indicated that the overt teaching of the formal background knowledge; that is, register and genre, brought about an increase in the performance of the EFL learners in writing.

Based on the findings of this study as well as the previous studies, it can be claimed that Iranian university students will write better and successfully if they are given formal teaching about the register; that is, the field, tenor and mode of the discourse, and the genre of different text types in accordance with the systemic functional linguistics. The familiarity with the register and genre helps students build up a text in relation to the context of situation, which focuses on who, what, how, when and where, on the one hand, and the context of culture, which focuses on the cultural aspect of the communicative event, on the other hand.

All things considered, it can be concluded that a systemic orientation to discourse knowledge can engage students in the considering of the global aspects of the text at the discourse and the local aspects of the text at the sentence level at the same time. Globally, the students are enabled to focus on the schematic structure of the written text along with their constituent stages, which come

together to fulfill an overall purpose, at the text level; and locally they are enabled to pay attention to the logical and semantic relationships at the sentence level. This framework puts premium on the forgotten area in the writing activities; that is to say, it takes the students beyond the sentence level, which is of great significance in the Iranian EFL setting, and familiarize them with the context of situation and the context of culture, which renders possible the producing of a written text as a discourse.

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Appendix A: Template for Multiple Trait Scoring Rubric for the Writing Test

Trait 1: Genre

5 Points: The writing, as a sample of an exposition text, observes the order, structure and presentation of information perfectly. It has an inviting introduction (or Thesis), clear discussion and logical transition of the main ideas (six Arguments) and a satisfying ending (or Conclusion).

4 Points: The writing, as a sample of an exposition text, observes the order, structure and presentation of information. It has an inviting introduction (or Thesis), discussion of some of the main ideas (more than two and less than six Arguments) and a satisfying ending (or Conclusion).

3 Points: The writing, as a sample of an exposition text, observes the order, structure and presentation of information. It has an introduction (or Thesis), discussion of only a few of the main ideas (less than three Arguments) and an ending (or Conclusion).

2 Points: The writing, as a sample of an exposition text, does not observe the order, structure and presentation of information perfectly. It may have an introduction (or Thesis) and one/two main ideas (or Arguments) or an ending (or Conclusion).

1 Point: The writing, as a sample of exposition text, does not observe the order, structure and presentation of information. It has only an introduction (or Thesis), or one/two main ideas (or Arguments) or an ending (or Conclusion).

0 Point: No summarizing is attempted.

Trait 2: Register

5 Points: The writing, as a sample of exposition text, is clear and focused in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic. It bears a perfect and accurate discussion of the subject matter (Field), a well-organized sequence of all the available main ideas (Mode) and a fully impersonalized restatement of the topic from the passage

writer's point of view (Tenor).

4 Points: The writing, as a sample of an exposition text, is clear and focused enough in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic without too much confusion. It bears almost a perfect discussion of the subject matter (Field), a well-organized sequence of many of the available main ideas (Mode) and an impersonalized restatement of the topic from the passage writer's point of view (Tenor).

3 Points: The writing, as a sample of exposition text, is almost clear and focused in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic. It bears relatively perfect discussion of the subject matter (Field), an organized sequence of some of the available main ideas (Mode) and a rather impersonalized restatement of the topic from the passage writer's point of view (Tenor).

2 Points: The writing, as a sample of exposition text, is unclear and unfocused in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic. It bears an imperfect and inaccurate discussion of the subject matter (Field), a rather poorly-organized sequence of a few of the available main ideas (Mode), and a restatement of the topic not from the passage writer's point of view (Tenor).

1 Point: The writing, as a sample of exposition text, is very unclear and unfocused in terms of the topic, main ideas, logical relationships between the ideas and the writer's commitment to the topic. It only bears a sketchy mention of the subject matter (Field) and a poorly-organized sequence of only one or two of the available main ideas (Mode) irrespective of the passage writer's point of view (Tenor).

0 Point: No summarizing is attempted.

Cumulative Points:

Final Scores Based on Five-point Scale: