The Effect of Using Advance Organizers (Concept Maps) on Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Performance

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ABSTRACT

Writing has always been considered as one of the most challenging skills both for English Teachers and Learners and it gets even more demanding when it comes to EFL learners with their limited opportunity to use language in real contexts. The difficulty of writing is multidimensional; spelling, punctuation, word choices, and so on. Thus the current study has been an attempt in examining the effect of Advance Organizer strategy on Improving Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. Sixty female language learners at low intermediate level with an age range of 11-15 participated in this quasi- experimental study. There were two groups, one as experimental and the other as control. The results of the study revealed strong support for the positive effect of Advance Organizer and the experimental group outscored in the post-test. Since Advance Organizers match the mind, learners' writing improved in statistically significant manner and, learners learnt to write coherently and successfully.

KEYWORDS: Advance Organizers, Concept Maps, Iranian EFL learners, writing performance

INTRODUCTION

Writing Skill
Language learners are supposed to practice" identifying, describing, and creating descriptive texts through using the generic structure and linguistic features associated with this text type, such as using the identification and description components, employing the simple present tense, and utilizing appropriate conjunctions" (Hammond as cited in Astiantih, & Akfan,2023,p.433) Writing is one of the most effective communication tools in which used for learning and, representing what one has acquired. It assists communication and connections with other people,

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and supports self-expression, self-reflection, and individual development. Writing provides language users with additional ways for expressing themselves in a written manner. Consequently, problems with writing give rise to obstacles in education, employment and other phases of life (Graham, 2006). "Writing gives the opportunity to the students to be adventurous with the language, to take the risk and to go further of what is learned to talk about" (Shouman, 2002, p.1). Clifford (1991 cited in Shouman, 2002, p.1) states that, "The teacher has to encourage learners to write for communication, they should focus on the ideas and meanings they wish to convey rather than on mechanics of writing, such as spelling, and handwriting" (p.42). It can be said that it is one of the most important parts of learning a language which has been ignored for many years, thus it is common for learners in today's educational scheme to hate or even avoid the writing activities. Generally speaking, learning to write is exclusively challenging. It is very vital to be able to express yourself fine. Our writings occasionally lead us; for instance, in proposing for a job we need to provide a C.V. or at times we need to write a cover letter for an article, or to send e-mails to people we don't really know. Poor writing is a kind of imperfection, it might cause misunderstanding due to misinterpret of sentences and words. We need to write well for the wide range of purposes: for translating our ideas and thoughts in the form of documents, in research studies for summarizing our work in an informative and useful manner. The most essential reason might be that while writing we actually send message to our readers about our identities. Consequently; we are to be clear, and accurate for not being "misunderstood", "underestimated" or "ignored". Imagine someone without such an important skill! in academic contexts students who are not flourishing in writing (e.g. exams), are simply at risk of being recognized as unsuccessful pupils. Writing well is indeed a big challenge for native and non-native students. Writing well is an art that everyone needs to master with the purpose of being successful. Writing well signifies beliefs, ideas, thoughts and facts in the simplest and clear words. Actually nobody is taught to write well during schooling, but learning it, is extremely essential in order to do extremely well at both academic and professional contexts (Trimmer, 2004). The importance of writing derives from the fact that writing is the main foundation upon which communication, history, record keeping, and art is instigated. Writing stands at the heart of academic life. This is so because writing is the suitable mode of deciding on the students' performance. Learners' academic performance can be simply judged through her writing skill. For this reason, it is deemed as the heart of academic life. But the paradox is that of all the four skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing students mostly experience serious problems in writing skill. It is safe to claim that this skill takes time and effort to master, but it digs out numerous opportunities across a life span (Sunthara Valli & Vishnu Priya, 2016).

Advance Organizer

The advance organizers learning strategy has been popularized by   David P. Ausubel. An advance organizer has been considered as an effective tool for teachers that create atmosphere to introduce the lesson topic and demonstrate how it links back to what has been acquired previously. Through using an advance organizer Learning and remembering new information can be developed (Ausubel, 1960). Two main types of advance organizers in Ausubel's theory are Comparative and expository organizers. It is a safe claim that comparing and contrasting two sets of information would of significant importance. This definitely helps language learners see that they are familiar with the subject matter they're learning; they can compare them to something they've already been exposed to in their daily lives.

Concept Maps

According to Novak and Canas (2008) Concept maps are visual -graphical tools with the aim of organizing and representing knowledge. They comprise different concepts of which "enclosed in circles or boxes of some type", and their connections have been specified through "a connecting line" relate two notions. They also found that words on the line, referred to as linking words or linking phrases, specify the relationship between the two concepts. Novak and Canas (2008, p.1) have defined concept as "a perceived regularity in events or objects, or records of events or objects, designated by a label". A word is the label for most concepts, though sometimes symbols are utilized such as + while occasionally more than a word is used. They further add that an additional characteristic of concept maps is that" the concepts are represented in a hierarchical fashion with the most inclusive, most general concepts at the top of the map and the more specific, less general concepts arranged hierarchically below. The hierarchical structure for a particular domain of knowledge also depends on the context in which that knowledge is being applied or considered" (p.2). According to Novak and Canas (2008) another significant characteristic of concept maps is "the inclusion of cross-links. These are relationships or links between concepts in different segments or domains of the concept map. Cross-links help us see how a concept in one domain of knowledge represented on the map is related to a concept in another domain shown on the map" (p.2).

Research Question & Hypothesis

In the current study the researchers tried to find answers to the following question and hypothesis.

Does Advance Organizer have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill?

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Hypothesis

RH: Advance Organizer has a positive effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill. NH: Advance Organizer has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing skill.

The variables of the current study are: in the experimental group the independent variable is Advance Organizer and the dependent variable is writing performance, while in the control group the independent variable is traditional writing instruction and the dependent variable is writing performance.

METHODOLOGY

The design of the present study is quasi-experimental, that is without random assignment. (Typical experimental study includes a control group for the case of comparing the results of treatment and at least one experimental group). A total number of 60 male language learners at lower- intermediate level with an age range of 14-17 have been the participants of the present study that were selected from Azerbaijani background. It is worth mentioning that the participants were selected from "*Alborz*" & "*Elm*" institutions.

At the beginning of the study a PET language proficiency test was conducted to the both groups including Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. After solving the problem of controlling the proficiency level of the participants, a pre-test was run to determine the writing ability of participants before starting the study. the control group (for also reassuring the comparability of both groups namely; there were no pre-existing differences between them before the study). Then the researchers began the instruction. They introduced the Advance Organizers to the experimental group, and then started teaching writing through using Advance Organizer in the form of Concept Maps. At the beginning of each session in experimental group, the researchers drew the Concept Map on the board and asked the students to tell their ideas about possible words, phrases and sentences that may be included in the topic under discussion. The researcher asked the students of the control group to write about the same topics but without any particular treatment. This process was completed in 15 sessions. After that one post-test was run to both groups. The scores were gathered and the collected data was analyzed by means of SPSS. There were two groups in the present study thus the researcher made use of t-test for analyzing the scores. A **t-test** is an analysis of two populations' means through the use of statistical examination; a **t-test** with two samples is commonly used with small sample sizes, **testing** the difference between the samples when the variances of two normal distributions are not known.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

1 Results of the data analysis for the research question

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics-Control Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	13.833	30	1.683	0.307
	Posttest	14.000	30	1.364	0.249

Indicated in the Table1, the control group of the study had a mean score of 13.833 (SD=1.683) in the pretest. The group, however, scored higher (M=14.000, SD=1.364) in the posttest. It can be seen that there was an increase in the scores from Pretest to Posttest for the participants in the control group.

Table 2. Paired Samples Test- Control Group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest - Pretest	.166	1.116	.203	-.583	0.250	-.817	29	0.420

Table 2 depicts that the mean increase in the scores was .166 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.583 to 0.250. It is also indicated that the mean increase in the posttest was not statistically significant (t= (29) = -.817, P= 0.420).

Table 3. Paired Samples Statistics-Experimental Group

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2	Pretest	13.633	30	1.847	0.337
	Posttest	18.233	30	1.222	0.2223

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Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the experimental group. By a brief look, it can be noticed that there was an increase in the scores from Pretest (*M*= 13.633, *SD*= 1.847) to Posttest (*M*= 18.233, *SD*=1.222).

Table 4. Paired Samples Test- Experimental Group

			Paired Differences					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Posttest - Pretest	4.600	1.275	0.232	-5.076	-4.123	-19.749	29	0.000

According to the Table4, the mean increase in the scores was 4.600 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.076 to -4.123. The mean increase in the posttest was statistically significant (t= (29) = -19.749, *P*= 0.000). In comparison with the control group, the experimental group performed much better in the posttest. Therefore, the Hypothesis of the study is supported.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics-Pretest

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Control	30	13.833	1.683	0.307
	Experimental	30	13.633	1.847	0.337

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Table 5 depicts the descriptive statistics for the writing pretest. The experimental and control groups of the study had a mean score of 13.633 (*SD*=1.847) and 13.833 (*SD*=1.683) respectively. That is to say, the two groups did not perform differently in the pretest and they were homogeneous in terms of their writing performance.

Table 6. Independent Samples Test-Pretest

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
| | | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
									Lower	Upper
Pretest	Equal variances assumed	0.337	0.564	0.438	58	0.663	0.200	0.456	-.713	1.113
	Equal variances not assumed			0.438	57.505	0.663	0.200	0.456	-.713	1.113

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of experimental and control groups in the pretest. The mean difference in statistics scores was 0.200 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -.713 to 1.113. The results revealed no significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in the writing pretest t (58) = 0.438, p = 0.663. Therefore, the two groups performed homogeneously in the writing pretest.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics-Posttest

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Control	30	14.00	1.364	0.249
	Experimental	30	18.23	1.222	0.223

According to the descriptive statistics shown in the Table 7, the experimental group performed much better than the control group in the posttest. The mean score for the former was 18.23 (*SD*= 1.222) whereas for the latter the mean score is 14.00 (*SD*= 1.364).

Table 8. Independent Samples Test-Posttest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	0.00	0.99	-12.65	58	0.00	-4.23	0.33	-4.90	-3.56
	Equal variances not assumed			-12.65	57.31	0.00	-4.23	0.33	-4.90	-3.56

Another independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the statistics scores of the two groups in the posttest. The mean difference in statistics scores was -4.23 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -4.90 to -3.56. The results revealed significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups in the posttest t (58) = -12.65, p = 0.00. Therefore, the research hypothesis is supported.

The research findings have designated that the integration of the Advance Organizer (concept maps) has generated positive effects on enhancing the language learners' proficiency in writing texts. Although not all language learners reached the full level of proficiency, a majority of them demonstrated evident and significant enhancement in their writing skills (as found during tests) The implementation of the concept maps has been found successful way of teaching writing skill. The findings of the study are in line with those of Pishghadam & Ghanizadeh (2006), in that concept mapping is considered as a cognitive tool that organizes, creates and facilitates language learners' thinking and reasoning and consequently problem solving skills which are definitely important in the process of learning in general and language learning in particular. The findings of the current study are also in agreement with what has been reported in the seminal work of Astiantih & Akfan (2023); since they also came to conclusion that concept maps are helpful for teachers in creating active, inventive, effective, and fun ways of learning for language learners in line with their learning style.

CONCLUSION

Like other research studies the present study has some points that are recommended to take into consideration by teachers, educators, syllabus designers etc. The main objective of Advance Organizers is making the process of teaching/ learning easier and comprehensible. Advance Organizers (concept maps) can be used in all of the stages of teaching; before, during and after instruction. Regarding classroom discussions and comments it can be concluded that the language learners have been interested in using Advance Organizers (concept maps) and found them helpful. They decided to use them in learning other subjects a well. Writing was not a daunting task for them anymore. It would be helpful if teachers use Advance Organizers (concept maps) to aid language learners to recognize the association between various pieces of information that they may have otherwise failed to recognize. There is no doubt that active schema is of great role in the process of learning. If one knows what kind of Advance Organizers is the most appropriate for learners, they would be able to help learners to be actively engaged throughout the learning process. Through using Advance Organizers (concept maps) teachers can assess their prior knowledge of a subject and activate it accordingly. Consequently, teachers would be able to make strategic decisions regarding how to present the Advance Organizers to activate or create relevant background. Their strength in activating the relevant schema would even more powerful for LD student (students with learning disabilities), as confirmed by Dexter and Hughes, (2011, p.54): "It is clear that Advance Organizers may greatly assist students with learning disabilities in connecting new material to prior knowledge, identifying main ideas and supporting details, drawing inferences, and creating effective problem-solving strategies". Learning disabled students experience serious problems in finding out the existing links of concepts, as a result they fail to learn meaningfully. Motivating students by Advance Organizers is another advantage of them which cannot be ignored. Since Advance Organizers (concept maps) typify information in outlines and graphic forms, thus improve learning by activating learners' interest and keeping their awareness and concentration.

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