

THE EFFECT OF TEACHING LADO'S CONCEPTS OF CULTURE ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The present study sought to investigate the effect of teaching Lado's concepts of culture on Iranian EFL learners' description writing. The main question of this study attempted to answer was whether teaching Lado's concepts of culture might enhance higher knowledge and ability of description writing in Iranian learners of English at university level. To answer this question, 60 sophomore undergraduate translator trainees were selected via administering the Oxford Placement (OPT). Then they were divided into two groups of 30 and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. A pretest of writing was administered to both groups, after that, the experimental group was taught five categories Lado's cultural concepts including transportation system, educational system, sport, customs and festivals, and ritual behaviors for 10 sessions while there was no treatment for the control group. A posttest of writing was then administered to both groups and data of were analyzed via calculating an independent sample t-test and ANCOVA coefficients. The results illustrated that the Iranian EFL learners in experimental group received higher scores in description writing after being treated with 10 sessions of teaching Lado's concepts of culture.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural Concepts, Writing, Teaching Writing, Coherence, Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

As one of four skills, writing has occupied a prominent place in most language classes. Many EFL students need to write in English for occupational and academic purpose. Writing remains the commonest way of examining the student's performance in the target language and very often success in examinations requires an ability to write. For learners, writing is a means of recording and reformulating knowledge and developing ideas. It is a complex construct involving multi-level processes. In order to do successfully, that is, to gain some special ability to write for a particular purpose, the writer must engage in various processes at the word, sentence structure, and text level (Spack, 1984). Farhady et al. (2006) stated that writing is a complex skill whose mastery is achieved in different phases: writing readiness and beginning writing lead to free writing.

The skills such as reading different genres in both SL and TL, developing writing skills, getting familiar with the culture, customs, and social setting of the second language and target language by speaker being acquainted with appropriate use of dictionaries. In spite of all these efforts, it is said that many students still confront difficulties when they are writing a text. These problems rest with the unfamiliarity of the student of the SL with the competency of the TL, as a result some of them may occur during writing a text. Some parts of difficulties of students are from the defect of their grammar knowledge and are resulted the defect or the lack of knowledge about the language and culture of the first or second language. The intention of this study is to establish the purpose which concepts of culture are effective in

EFL learners' description writing, with particular reference to whether they are using such concepts to empower their ability or not.

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of teaching Lado's concepts of culture as an independent variable on the students' knowledge and ability of description writing as a dependent variable. That is, the researcher wanted to clarify whether teaching cultural concepts operates identically on different subjects who showed pronounced differences in the above dichotomy. It is worth-mentioning here that knowing about cultural concepts can be a mean for promoting and developing students' writing ability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first notion highlighted in this study was the notion of writing along with the concepts such as grammatical patterns of the sentences, grammar, vocabulary, and other features which are deemed to be the subcategories of the broad notion of writing. Traditionally, written language focused primarily on the products of writing. An emphasis is placed on the mechanics of writing which includes handwriting, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, coherence, and cohesion. Effective writing requires the acquisition of strategies, metacognitive knowledge, and an interactional approach to regulate and control strategy use. Writing involves planning, monitoring and revising of written work, sensitivity to text organization, awareness of the needs of the audience and employment of strategies to stimulate idea generation (Taylor and Beach, 1984).

Increasing awareness of second language writers' need to produce extended written text led to the realization that there was more to writing than constructing grammatical sentences (Raims 1983b: 7, cited in Schmitt, 2002). Kaplan (1966, also cited in Schmitt 2002) emphasized on the notion of 'contrastive rhetoric'- the notion that the writers' different cultural and linguistic backgrounds will be reflected in their 'rhetoric', with rhetoric typically seen as primarily a matter of textual structure. Of primary interest, especially in the early year, was the paragraph, where the focus was on its elements as well as options for its development. By far, the largest single concern in second language writing research has been 'contrastive rhetoric'. The focus of this work is on characterizing how first language 'cultural thought patterns' are reflected in second language writers' text, how some cultures put the responsibility for successful written communication on the writer and others on the reader, and how differences between 'collectivist' and 'individualist' tendencies manifest themselves in second language writing.

The second notion taken into consideration in this paper is the notion of culture and its concepts. Rather (1999) has proposed an informative way of investigating the cultural science. He has placed these theories into three categories: First, the symbolic approach in which cultural is socially constructed by individuals in concert. Second, Activity theory approach in which psychological phenomena are formed as people engage in socially organized activity. And third, the individualistic approach in which emphasis is on the individual who partakes of culture selectively and assimilates or negotiates his own model of a personal culture.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As Spack (1984) said learners should be helped to produce written text for a particular audience or a reader and a particular purpose. However, learners of English as a foreign language are well aware of the fact that, despite years of study, they are still unable to use the English language communicatively. It is evident that by having a good knowledge of second

language grammar and cultural system, second language learning would be accelerated as well. However the question rose is “how and by which methods and techniques we can achieve such an aim.” Since learning English as a second language is considered as an essential need nowadays and the performance of students in writing ability has not been that much satisfying so far, the application of efficient methods and techniques to promote their output is quite significant. The reason for such failure should be traced but certainly most of them will remain out of scope of this study.

Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the effect of teaching Lado’s concepts of culture as a classroom activity on Iranian EFL learners’ description writing. The main question of this study will try to answer whether teaching Lado’s cultural concepts will enhance higher knowledge or ability in Iranian EFL learners’ description writing at university level.

RESEARCH QUESTION OF THE STUDY

This study sought answer to the following question:

Does teaching Lado’s concepts of culture affect Iranian EFL learners’ description writing?

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

In order to keep with the above research question, the following null hypothesis, accordingly, was formulated:

Teaching Lado’s concepts of culture does not affect Iranian EFL learners’ description writing.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Writing is one of the most authentic and reliable ways of getting thoughts to others, learning to write is regarded as the acquiring of basic skills on which other later and probably more important skills can be built, and without which further education may be largely impossible (Cooper, Odell, 1978). Halliday (1979b) refers to writing as learning how to mean. It is remarked that writing is a negotiable and explanatory act requiring great judgment. It, thus, implies contact and negotiation among the contributors in its process of creation.

Writing is not an isolated task formed in some capacity cut off from the rest of human experience. It has been shown to be fundamentally integrated with other language skills, i.e. reading, speaking, and listening. Krashen (1978) in his theory, “input hypothesis”, for instance, emphasizes that the close integration of writing with reading and with other language skills. It is important to view writing not solely as the product of an individual, but as a social and cultural act. Writing is an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose, and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997, p. 8). In a similar vein, Sperling (1996, p. 55) notes that ‘writing like language in general, is a meaning-making activity that is socially and culturally shaped and individually and socially purposeful.

According to Lado (1986, p. 52), in “Linguistic across Cultures” (first published in 1952), culture is synonymous with the “ways of people”. He considered the concepts of culture in three dimensions: their form, meaning, and distribution; Chastain (1988, p. 302) defines culture as “the way people live” and according to Brown (2000, p. 176), culture is “a way of life”. Many scholars emphasize the close relationship between language and culture. According to Brown (2000, p. 177), “A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without

losing the significance of either language or culture.” Byram (1989, p. 94) adds that “the language holds the culture through the denotations and connotations of its semantics”, which is why it is important to teach culture through its language. Kramersch (1998, p. 3) identifies three ways how language and culture are bound together. First, language expresses cultural reality (with words people express facts and ideas as well as reflect their attitudes). Second, language embodies cultural reality (people give meaning to their experience through the means of communication). Third, language symbolizes cultural reality (people view their language as a symbol of their social identity).

They pointed out that variation in writing in different cultures does not reflect inherent differences in thought patterns but rather cultural preferences which make greater use of certain options among the linguistic possibilities (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 184). These variations are learned primarily through the educational system, either directly (as in English, where certain rhetorical patterns are explicitly taught) or indirectly through extensive exposure to culture-specific patterns of discourse. Thus, these variations can be seen to some extent as reflections of cultural values as promoted through education. In recent years, a number of investigators have explored variations in writing patterns that can be at least partially attributed to cultural influences.

In summary, when the main aim of foreign language teaching is to develop students' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various situations, the teaching of culture should facilitate intercultural communication and understanding. Seelye formulates what he himself calls a supergoal for the teaching of culture: “All students will develop the culture understanding, attitudes, and performance skills needed to function appropriately within a segment of another society and to communicate with people socialized in that culture” (Seelye 1993:29). Chastain (1988:299-300) adds that, in language classes where intercultural understanding is one of the goals, students become more aware of their own culture and more knowledgeable about the foreign culture. In such classes, students learn to recognize cultural patterns of behavior and communication and function within the parameters with those new expectations. Culture is a separable part of language learning and teaching. Different in thought patterns affect students of English writing of the passage.

METHODOLOGY

The Pilot Study

There have been a number of reasons why a pilot study appeared essential in the current study. First, to come to clear understanding of how to approach the research question and the hypothesis of the study reported here; second, to gain support to indicate the existence of the problem stated; and finally; to compensate for the lack of supporting empirical studies regarding authentic materials, considering the current paucity of research evidence about the factors influencing concepts of culture in Iranian description writing especially.

The pilot study consisted of a test of writing to be answered by the participants. It was conducted on 15 sophomore translator trainees in the Islamic Azad University at Tonekabon. The reliability of the pilot study test was determined through calculating the Kuder/Richardson-21 formula ($R = 0.7$) and scoring through inter-rater reliability of three professors. The 15 participants were asked to participate in a paper and pencil test of writing. It was asked each participant to write an appropriate paragraph according to a given topic. The participants' answers were then scored by the researcher out of 10 (the criterion).

The result of the study indicated that 10 out of the 15 participants showed significant deficiency in their writing knowledge (with the average mean of 3.42 out of 10 marks) in

spite of the fact that they were expected to have an acceptable performance. This result could help the researcher attain supporting evidence for the existence of the problem that the participants had in their grammar knowledge. The results of the pilot study have been indicated in table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the pilot study, description paragraph writing scores

<i>Score</i>	<i>Total No</i>	<i>No Upper the Mean</i>	<i>No Lower the Mean</i>	<i>Total Mean</i>	<i>The Average Upper the Mean</i>	<i>The Average Lower the Mean</i>
Pilot Study of Writing	15	5	10	4.35	5.6	3.42

Table (1) illustrates 15 participants participated in the pilot study of the English description writing and they received the scores indicated in the table. Their description writing was scores on the basis of a number of criteria including understanding the topic, using correct grammatical structures, vocabulary, spelling, punctuations, having coherence and cohesion in whole paragraph, and other criteria.

Participants

The participants of the current study were 60 Iranian EFL learners of English language majoring in translation. They were sophomore and junior translator trainees, with the age range 20-26 and no control of sex, who were selected randomly from among 100 trainees in the Islamic Azad University at Tonekabon based on the results of an OPT administered. Since the problem of writing is targeted, the 60 participants had to be representative of the weak trainees, thus, they were the student with the scores that are at least one standard deviation below the mean of the class. The 60 participants were then divided into two groups and were randomly assigned to the experimental group as well as the control group.

Materials

Four sorts of materials were used in this study: The OPT material for proficiency, the material for the pretest of the study, the material for the treatment of the study including: using power points, brochures, and so on, and lastly, the material for the posttest of the study. The OPT used in this study consisted of several sections including grammar, sentence organization, vocabulary, and writing. The answers were then collected and scored by the researcher. The pilot study test was a test of description writing. For its reliability, it was used the Kurder/Richardson-21 formula ($R=0.7$). It was asked the participants to write an appropriate paragraph according to the given topic. The participants' answers were scored by the researcher. The pretest of the study consisted of a test of writing. There was a topic, and participants wrote description paragraph writing. The material for posttest of the study consisted of a test of writing with the characteristics of pretest. Since the study here was aimed at indicating the degree of progress from the pretest to the posttest in the experimental group of the study in which teaching Lado's concepts of culture were being applied, the same test was administered in both the experimental and the control groups. The reliability of pretest and posttest were determined through calculating the Chronbach α ($R= 0.67$) and scoring through inter-rater reliability of three professors.

Procedure

The OPT of the study administered for measuring the degree of the participants' proficiency was a paper-pencil test. The time allowed was 70 minutes as had been determined in the OPT. The pretest of the study was a paragraph writing test. The time allocation for the

paragraph writing pretest was about 30 minutes. The treatment of the study included 10 sessions of teaching Lado’s concepts of culture to experimental group. During the treatment, five chosen concepts of culture were taught. They were included: transportation system, educational system, sports, customs and festivals, and ritual behaviors. Lastly, it was asked for the participants to write a paragraph which was resembled to the pretest in terms of time allocation and test characteristics.

Scoring

The OPT that was used in this study was scored on the basis of the standard criteria introduced by the test itself. The criterion for scoring the pretest and the posttest of the study was the maximum of 10.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from testing hypothesis of the study will be analyzed via calculating a t-test between the posttests paragraph writing of the experimental and control groups of the study and the one-way ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Descriptive Analysis of the Data

This section focuses on the descriptive analysis of the obtained data in this study. Such analysis was done using the SPSS software. Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis for the pretest and the posttest of description writing in the experimental group of the study:

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the data of the experimental group of the study

<i>Tests</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.Deviation</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Missing Values</i>
PREDPW	30	4.1260	0.89711	0.805	0.00
POSDPW	30	6.9577	1.11058	1.233	0.00
Valid N	30				
(listwise)					

As table (2) indicates, the number of participants has been 30 in each experiment (NPRE =30; NPOS =30), and there has been no missing value (Missing Value=0.00) which means that all selected participants participated in the experiments of the study. The mean for the PREDPW (pretest of description paragraph writing) scores was shown to be 4.1260 ($\bar{x}_{PRE} = 4.1260$) as compared to the mean for the POSDPW (posttest of description paragraph writing) scores which was 6.9577 ($\bar{x}_{POS} = 6.9577$). As for the standard deviations obtained for the experimental group, there seems to be more variability among the PREDPW scores than the scores in the POSDPW. This may give an image of the participants’ posttest scores being more homogenous after conducting the treatment of the study (treating with Lado’s concepts of culture).

Similarly, the descriptive analysis for the pretest and the posttest of DPW in the control group of the study has been indicated in table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of the data of the control group of the study

<i>Tests</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.Deviation</i>	<i>Variance</i>	<i>Missing Values</i>
PREDPW	30	3.7903	1.10306	1.217	0.00
POSDPW	30	4.1300	0.60601	0.367	0.00
Valid N (listwise)	30				

As table (3) indicates, the number of participants has been 30 in each experiment (NPRE =30; NPOS =30), and there has been no missing value (Missing Value=0.00) which means that all selected participants participated in the experiments of the study. The mean for the PREDPW (pretest of description paragraph writing) scores was shown to be 3.7903 ($\bar{x}_{PRE}=3.7903$) as compared to the mean for the POSDPW (posttest of description paragraph writing) scores which was 4.1300 ($\bar{x}_{POS} = 4.1300$). As for the standard deviations obtained for the control group, there seems to be more variability among the PREDPW scores than the scores in the POSDPW. This may give an image of the participants' posttest scores being more homogenous after conducting the treatment of the study (using existing method).

Inferential Analysis of the Data

This section emphasizes the inferential analysis of the obtained data of this study. The analysis of the data was done via using the SPSS software from which the 'Compare Means', 'Independent Sample Test' for calculating the t value, furthermore, 'Regression' and 'Linear' windows for calculating the Covariance.

Table 4. T -test results of the study

<i>T-Test Results</i>	<i>Observed t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>
Between the posttest scores of the experimental Group and the control group of the study (Equal variance not assumed)	12.242	44.864	0.000

As table (4) is indicated, the t-value was calculated between the posttests of description writing the participants in the experimental and the control groups. The observed t value was calculated as to be 12.242 ($t_{obs} = 12.242$) and the degree of freedom was 44.864 ($df= 44.864$). the reason why the degree of freedom here was not calculated based on the common formula of ($df= N-1$) was that the SPSS calculated the degree of freedom while considering the variances of the participants posttest groups as unequal instead of equal ($V_{EXP} = 1.233$ Vs $V_{CON}= 0.367$) see tables (2) and (3). At last, the level of significance was calculated as to be 0.00 ($p= 0.00$) which has been used in interpreting the data for the rejection or support of the hypothesis of the study in the next section.

The other inferential analysis of the data of the current study was related to the degree of relationship between the pretest and the posttest of description writing in both participant groups. This was indicated by calculating the Covariance coefficient between the pretest and the posttest scores in each group of the study. The results have been illustrated the Covariance in table 5:

Table 5. The covariance table for the pretest and the posttest scores of the experimental and control groups

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between the pretest and the posttest of the Exp.G	1	6.241	5.918	0.022
Between the pretest and the posttest of the Con.G	1	0.073	0.193	0.664

According to table (5), the covariance between the two sets of pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group is 5.918 (Cov PRE POS EXP= 5.918) while it is 0.193 (Cov PRE POS CON= 5.918) in the control group of study. This means that the degree of statistical distance between the pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group is higher than the control group which is representative of the closeness of the scores in the pretest and posttest scores of the control group; consequently, it can be concluded that the control group of the study has no significant change or progress as a result of being treated without teaching Lado’s concepts of culture.

Result of Hypothesis Testing

The results of testing hypothesis of the study have been presented and illustrated in this section. In order to give a detailed analysis, attempts were made to take advantage of the results of the study as evidence to determine the rejection or support of the hypothesis. Furthermore, the rejection or support of the hypothesis was justified by explaining the consequences of such rejection or support, i.e. what would happen if the hypothesis of the current study was rejected or supported. Before analyzing the hypothesis of the study, it will be repeated below:

H0: Teaching Lado’s concepts of culture does not affect Iranian EFL learners’ description paragraph writing.

The hypothesis of the study which targeted the effect of teaching Lado’s concepts of culture on Iranian EFL learners’ description writing was rejected. Evidence from various sources of data could help to verify the rejection. The results of the T-Test of the study (see table 4) could be employed to confirm this analysis, accordingly, the observed t value calculated by the SPSS software was 12.242 (tobs= 12.242) and the degree of freedom was 44.864 (df= 44.864) while the critical value of t determined on the basis of considering the 2-tailed significance level of 0.05 (P= 0.05) was 2.015 (tcrit= 2.015). Thus, the observed t was higher than the critical t and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of the current study.

The second evidence to verify the rejection of the hypothesis was the value of the level of significance calculated by the SPSS software to be 0.000 (Significance 2-tailed= 0.000). Since this value was lower than 0.05 (based on the SPSS regulations), the difference between the means of the posttests of the study could not be by the chance, and moreover, the rejection of the hypothesis of the study indicated that teaching Lado’s concepts of culture would enhance the higher writing ability of the participants in the experimental group of the study. Also, the rejection of the hypothesis of the study could be supported by showing the experimental group participants’ progress from the pretest to the posttest. Table 5 provided the evidence for this support. According to it, the covariance value between the pretest and the posttest scores in the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. This meant that the posttest scores of description writing were distant from the pretest scores in the experimental group and indicated that teaching Lado’s concepts of culture affected the participants’ writing ability and caused the posttest scores to stand higher.

Moreover, the other evidence was the control group participants' lack of progress from the pretest to the posttest. According to the table 5, the covariance value between the pretest and the posttest scores in the control group was lower than that of the experimental group. This meant that the posttest scores of description writing were close to the pretest scores in the control group and it was indicated that not teaching Lado's concepts of culture affected the participants' writing ability and caused the posttest scores to stand as close as possible.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that teaching Lado's concepts of culture could result in a better performance of language learners in a test of writing. These findings seem to be compatible with the findings of Chastain (1988), McGrath (2002), and many others who strongly support the idea of teaching culture of foreign language learning; thus, the results of the current study can have contributions towards establishing a relationship between teaching cultural concepts and having better performance language skills especially writing skill. Brown (2001) said that written products are often the results of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures that require specialized skills, skills that not every speaker develops naturally. Good writing is the result of clear thinking. A good piece of writing starts with organizing the thoughts and concepts you want to include in your writing. According to Halliday (1985), writing emerged in societies as a result of cultural changes that created new communicative needs. Rivers (1981) believed that writing in the language becomes more complicated when it involves writing meaningful segments of language which might be used in specific circumstances. In similar vein, Sperling (1996, p. 55) notes that "writing, like language in general, is a meaning-making activity that is socially and culturally shaped and individually and socially purposeful. In addition to, the idea of contrastive rhetoric has recently regained respectability, as it has become clear to researchers that many aspects of writing are influenced by culture. Leki (1992) and Grabe and Kaplan (1989) provided useful introductions to some of the cultural influences on writing.

Moreover, the results of this study are in line with Valette (1986, p. 182, first published in 1977) who maintains that together with making progress in foreign language, students, also, increase their awareness of the culture of the country whose language is being learnt. In her opinion, this broadened awareness includes such aspects of culture as the way of life, geographic, historical, economic, artistic, and scientific aspects. These, in sum, constitute the general background of members of the target culture. Students who share this knowledge "demonstrate[s] an increased awareness of the parameters of that target culture."

At last, there exists a widespread consensus among scholars (Kramsch, 1993, Byram, 1989, 1994, Seelye, 1993, Chastain, 1988, Lado, 1986, et al.) that language and culture should not be treated as separate entities and culture should be integrated into the language classroom. Language is seen as a part of culture and culture as a part of language, which is why they cannot be separated and should be taught together (Brown, 2000, p: 177). These above-mentions also confirm the results of this study.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Some ideas may be helpful for the improvement of the issue as future attempts in using concepts of culture. The fact is that research in general and research in language grammar especially in writing skills are not limited field. There are numerous topics to be worked on at least in terms of variables discussed in the current thesis.

The first point to consider is the issue of population of the study. It seems possible to go beyond the sample-population limitations of the study and to elicit information from a larger population. This was not practical in this study since there was a problem of distance: it was not practical to have samples from all parts within the short period of the time allocated to writing this work; although, this is possible. The future researchers are advised to take the time and replicate the study from this aspect.

As the second point, the future researchers are advised to expand the replications of the current study to other language situations or levels in Iran such as institutes and high school. Despite all attempts made in this study to see the possible effect of teaching Lado's concepts of culture on the participants' description writing ability, the results seemed to be applicable to university levels. The sole information elicited in the current study contained the data from the OPT as well as written proficiency tests used here, however, future researchers are suggested to conduct qualitative research studies as well as quantitative ones to elicit information about the teachers and learners positive or negative views about the treatment and the results of the study.

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