

The Impact of Vicarious Learning Strategies on Descriptive Writing Ability

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Abstract – This study is an attempt to investigate the effect of implementing vicarious learning strategies on Iranian EFL learners' descriptive writing ability. To fulfill the purpose of this study, 30 female learners were selected through convenient sampling from among a total number of 88 based on their performance on the Preliminary English Test (PET). To assess the learners' descriptive writing ability before the treatment, a writing pretest was given to the learners, then through a ten-session treatment some writing topics were used to write about and develop their descriptive writing ability. Writing instruction was presented through the use of vicarious learning strategies. After treatment, to assess the learners' descriptive writing ability, a writing posttest was given to them. The mean scores of the group on the pretest and posttest were compared through paired-samples T-test. The results of statistical analyses showed that vicarious learning strategies have significant effect on essay writing of Iranian EFL intermediate learners.

Keywords: descriptive writing ability, language learning strategies, social learning theory vicarious learning strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a means for communication, an activity that we are involved with every day. It is the responsibility of writing teachers to tell and help learners to consider it as an essential skill to acquire. Writing makes learners active in the classrooms, they cannot just sit and listen to their teacher, and they have to be involved. By learning to write, not only can learners have good communication skills, but also it creates some chances for them to improve and evaluate their thought (Caswell & Mahler, 2004).

Many authors claimed that conventional language curricula have separated language training and sociocultural progress, by teaching of writing processes in a second language we can remove this imposed separation (Cumming, 1989).

Terry (1989) mentioned that we must have a need to write in the second language, if learners really feel that learning to write is necessary for them and they really need it, this necessity makes them enthusiastic to acquire writing. Instructors of a second language know that learning to write is totally indispensable and crucial in second language learning; all four skills are identically needed, if we would like to teach a complete second language program it is obligatory to be careful about all four skills. "We write because we need to communicate for social, business and professional reasons; we need to find out information; we need to

give information; we need to have a written record of certain information lectures and messages, for example” (Terry, 1989, p. 51).

For learning to write learners must have the required metacognitive knowledge, and must not only be familiar with strategies which help them to improve learning but also know how and when can use them and why they will be useful (Rivard, 1994, cited in Prain and Hand, 1999). Cumming (1989) cited that “learning strategies are aspects of cognition amenable to change resulting in improvements in second language writing performance” (p. 84). Of course learning some isolated techniques and rules for writing or knowing a long list of universal writing strategies are no useful, rather teachers should help learners to ponder purposefully and tactically about writing (Little, 1996).

One of the components of communicative competence is strategic competence which is the capability to make use of strategies of language use in order to accomplish communicative goals (Canale & Swain 1980, cited in Taron, 1980). Researches about language learning strategy can be traced back to the 1970s and beyond.

Baker and Boonkit (2004) believed that by writing strategies we mean applying some specific techniques or approaches by the writer to expand his writing capability. According to Davidson (2009), teachers often do their own thing for teaching writing process and each teacher has his own method.

There is a connection between the strategies which are applied to learn and the learners’ degree of improvement in learning process. By perceiving this relationship learners can make their learning more effective, applying strategies helps them to fulfill this aim. Strategies assist the learner in attaining a special viewpoint regarding learning (Flemens, 2009). Prain and Hand (1999) believed that the strategies which pupils apply in order to learn writing require to be studied more.

Rubin (1975) talked about “successful learners” and strategies that they use to learn a language. She mentioned that if we be more familiar with strategies and tactics that successful learners use, we will be capable to explain and train these strategies to weaker pupils to increase their achievements.

Griffiths (2004) believed that each language learning strategy has its own underlying perspective and theory from which it is developed. One of the theories of language learning and teaching is social cognitive theory. This theory emphasizes that most human learning and retaining happen in a social environment (Schunk, 2012). According to Bandura (1986, cited in Schunk, 2012) “Learning is largely an information processing activity in which information about the structure of behavior and about environmental events is transformed into symbolic representations that serve as guides for action” (p. 121). Schunk (2012) believed that learning can happen either vicariously or enactively. He defined enactive learning as learning by acting or learning from the results of an individual’s action but vicarious learning as learning by following a model. It can occur without any obvious action. Askew and Field (2007) proposed that “experiments showed that mild vicarious learning experiences can create changes in both cognitive and behavioral response systems of the anxiety emotion, vicarious learning is a viable pathway through which cognitive and

behavioral components of anxiety develop” (p. 2625). Muller et al. (2007) believed that vicarious learning can be influential to challenge the students’ different conceptions and increasing their confidence. Tarone (1980) mentioned that by helping learners to say what they want or need to say, even if the communication is not perfect in grammatical or lexical terms, during the process of using the language, the learner will be exposed to the language input which may results in learning. Therefore, based on Tarone’s statement, the learners can learn to speak and can make progress in this process by acting, by using the language, and by getting the feedback of their own action.

There are lots of studies which prove vicarious learning has been displayed to be functioning in the realm of writing, studies. In all of these studies the effects of vicarious learning on written products are define, petite consideration is given to the effects of this kind of leaning on writing processes, in all of them we can realize this believe that variations in writing products are the result of variations in writing processes (Braaksma et al., 2004). Writers engage in some processes when they create a manuscript, in the past three decades investigators have concentrated on these processes (Faigley, 1990; Hairston, 1990; cited in Pajares & Johnson, 1996). It means that the processes and strategies that a learner uses during the process of writing are important to be considered by teachers. Rivard (1994, cited in Prain and Hand, 1998) believed that for students to learn from writing not to use writing to show learning, they must have the required metacognitive knowledge. They must not only know what strategies are necessary for improving learning, but also apprehend how and when to apply them and why they may be beneficial.

By doing some research over functional strategies to teach and learn writing, we can be hopeful to make writing as a favorable and pleasurable skill for learners to acquire and teachers to teach. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of vicarious learning strategies on Iranian EFL learners’ writing ability. Therefore, the following research question was pretended:

- Do vicarious learning strategies have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ descriptive writing ability?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

In this study, 60 out of 88 female native Iranian EFL learners in some classes of Goldis Language Institute in Tehran and Dehkadeh Zaban Language Institute in Karaj were selected, but only 30 out of 60 homogenized learners were randomly chosen to be considered as the main participants of this study. These learners were all female and at intermediate level of language proficiency, ages ranging from 15 to 25 years old.

B. Instruments

Four different instruments were used in this study: A preliminary English Test (PET), pretest, posttest, and PET general mark scheme. A version of the PET which is suitable for

intermediate learners was used. The version of test used in this study refers to 2004. The validity of the test is self-evident. Regarding the purpose of the study that is to test learners' writing ability, the researcher selected reading/grammar and writing part of the PET, therefore, the test consisted of two main parts (reading/grammar and writing). In the first part of the PET test one mark was considered for each correct answer and there was no any negative point for the wrong answers. The second part of the PET test which was about writing ability was evaluated by two raters according to PET general mark scheme of writing (Cambridge Preliminary English Test 3, teacher' book, 2003) which has six levels.

Before starting the treatment session in this study, all the 30 subjects were examined by writing an essay on a subject matter which was selected from PET writing topics (daily life, education, entertainment and media, etc.). The aim of conducting this test was to measure learner's writing ability before the treatment.

During the treatment, the teacher taught descriptive writing by applying vicarious learning strategies. After the treatment, all of the 30 subjects were examined by writing an essay about a subject matter which was also selected from PET writing topics. The aim of conducting this test was to get the effects of the treatment on learners' writing ability.

Learners' pretests and posttests were evaluated by two raters according to PET general mark scheme of writing which has six levels.

C. Procedure

Initially, in this study a version of the PET test was administered to 88 intermediate EFL students and 60 subjects who fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected, but only 30 out of 60 homogenized learners were randomly chosen and instructed descriptive writing vicariously. They formed the main subjects of the study. At the beginning of the first session, a short description on drawing an outline before writing an essay and also on the steps to be taken for writing a five paragraph essay were instructed to the students in order to help them write more conveniently. Then the homogenized participants (n = 30) received pre-test. The pretest was administered by giving a topic which was selected from PET writing topics to assess their writing ability before the treatment starts. Then during 10 sessions, participants wrote 10 essays on 10 different topics, which were selected from PET writing topics. Each session before writing on a new topic, initially, learners received some feedback by the teacher on their previous writing assignment, then the teacher and learners discussed the topic which they were going to write on. Learners talked about their own opinions on the topic and shared them with each other. The teacher outlined her own ideas on the topic and drew her own outline on the board to use it as a model for students. Finally she wrote her essay systematically and neatly on the board. After all these steps, the board was cleaned and learners began to draw their own outlines and write their own essays in about 30 minutes. The first group discussion on the topic helped the participants get new ideas by their teacher and also by their peers; it was a way to exchange their ideas. By observing the teacher while she was drawing her own outline on the board, learners acquired how to organize their essays. They learned to classify their own ideas and

make plans for their writings. Finally, by observing their teacher while she was writing her essay on the board, they learned that their essays should be as grammatical and systematic as possible, each paragraph should have its own topic sentence to start and a conclusion to finish. Moreover, it should have correct spelling and neatness. In fact, the teacher acted as a model in the class in order to help learners to learn writing skill vicariously.

III. RESULTS

A version of the PET including 30 items of reading/grammar and one section for writing activity was administered to 88 learners. Papers were scored by two raters to have more reliable scores and reduce subjectivity. The Inter-rater Reliability for the two raters' scores was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha and it was .895 (a reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered acceptable in most social science research situations). This amount of inter-rater reliability indicated a high level of internal consistency, it was concluded that the two raters' rating on the PET enjoyed high and significant inter-rater reliability. Table 1 displays the inter-rater reliability for the two raters' scores on the PET.

Table 1: Inter-rater Reliability for the Two Raters' Scores

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	88	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	88	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.895	2

In the next step the mean of the two raters' score was calculated to have one PET score for each learner. Then descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the PET was run to select 60 participants. Table 2 displays descriptive statistics of the PET by the whole 88 subjects.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the PET by the Whole Subjects

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PET Scores	88	15.00	47.00	33.2244	7.11745

As displayed in the table 2, the mean and the standard deviation of the PET were 33.22 and 7.11 respectively; that is to say the subjects whose score fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean (within 26.11 and 40.33) were selected. Out of 88 subjects, who took the PET, 60 subjects were selected, but only 30 out of these 60 homogenized learners were randomly chosen as the main participants of this study.

The pretest was administered and after conducting the treatment during 10 sessions, all of the 30 subjects wrote an essay as their descriptive writing ability posttest. Papers were scored by two raters to have more reliable scores and reduce subjectivity. There was no need to determine the inter-rater reliability of the two series of scores which are assigned by the two raters for the pretests and posttests, because the raters of these two tests were exactly those who scored the writing section of the PET test and it was once proved that they had similar tendency to give the same scores to the same paper, just the mean of the two scores for the pretest, and the two scores for the posttest were calculated to be considered as each learner’s main pretest or posttest scores. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics of the descriptive writing ability pretests and posttests by the learners and, figure 1 displays the mean scores of the descriptive writing ability pretests and posttests by them.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Descriptive Writing Ability Pretest and Posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
pretests	30	2.50	3.00	2.7417	.20218
posttests	30	2.50	3.50	3.1833	.23611

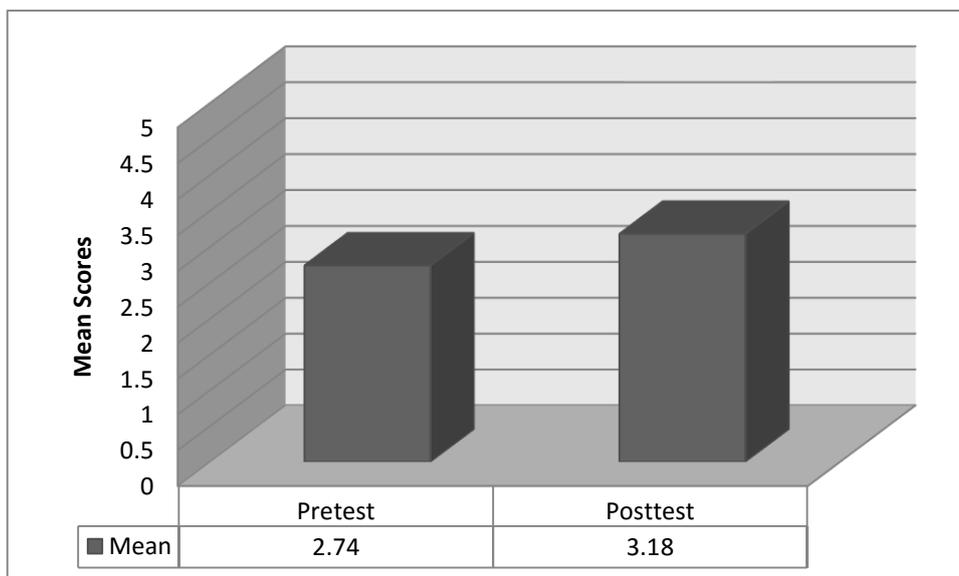


Figure 1: The Mean Scores of the Descriptive Writing Ability Pretest and Posttest

To investigate the effect of treatment during the study, the mean score of the subjects' pretest were compared by the mean score of their posttest on descriptive writing ability; this analysis was done through paired-samples T-test. Prior running each parametric test, assumptions and requirements for parametric studies including normality of the distribution of the scores and homogeneity of variances are run. Table 4 displays the ratio of skewness and kurtosis of the pretests and posttests. Skewness and kurtosis of these tests over their respective standard errors were within the acceptable range of +/- 1.96, so the normality of the distribution of the scores was met.

Table 4: The Ratio of Skewness and Kurtosis of the Pretests and Posttests

	pretest	posttest
N	30	30
Skewness	.063	-.734
Std. Error of Skewness	.427	.427
The Ratio of Skewness	0.14	-1.7
Kurtosis	-1.454	1.086
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.833	.833
The Ratio of Kurtosis	-1.7	1.3

Moreover, according to table 3, variances of pretests and posttests were homogenized because their standard deviations were very similar. As displayed in this table the standard deviations of pretests and posttests on the descriptive writing ability were .202 and .236 respectively. Consequently, the mean score of the subjects' pretests were compared by the mean score of their posttests on descriptive writing ability; this analysis was done through paired-samples T-test. Table 5 shows paired-samples T-test on the descriptive writing ability pretests and posttests.

Table 5: Paired-samples T-test on the Descriptive Writing Ability Pretests and Posttests

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair1 Pretest-posttest	-.44167	026816	.04896	-.54180	-.34153	-9.021	29	.000

As displayed in table 5 the mean difference between descriptive writing ability pretest and descriptive writing ability posttest was-.441. This difference was negative so this showed that the participants could improve their descriptive writing ability after treatment. T value was

-9.02, degree of freedom was 29, and significance value was .000. This amount of significance value was less than p value which was 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), so it is statistically significant.

Based on the above mentioned results, it was concluded that there was significant difference between the mean scores of the descriptive writing ability pretest and the descriptive writing ability posttest of the participants. That is to say the participants improved their descriptive writing ability after treatment, as it is shown in the table 3 and the figure 1; the mean scores on the descriptive writing ability pretests and the descriptive writing ability posttests were 2.74 and 3.18 respectively.

IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The present study was intended to explore the effect of vicarious learning strategies on the descriptive writing ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Based on the results of paired sample t-test between pretest and posttest of the participants in this study, it was found that the students experiencing vicarious learning strategies could improve their descriptive writing ability. This finding was supported by previous researches. Accordingly, there may be several possible explanations why learners' writing ability became more efficient vicariously.

Firstly, by seeing a task we can learn earlier than by actual performing of the task (Bandura 1977, cited in Manz & Simz, 1981). Acquiring can be occurred by helping learners to have access to the experiences of the other learners (Mayes et al., 2001). Modeling offers a reliable and standard reference to pupils; they can simply assess their abilities and skills according to the model, even without experiencing the action (Oettingen 1995, cited in Chan and Lam, 2008).

In addition, in vicarious learning actually learners both acquire and ponder, vicarious learning indeed is involving in a condition in order to comprehend it (Ellis et al. 2004, cited in Roberts, 2010).

Furthermore, vicarious learning can progress students' self-efficacy and thoughts regard to education, particularly in complicated issues (Muller et al. 2007). In cooperative learning environments the unceasing contact and communication with the other members which are involved in the action of learning leads to have some variations regard to our self-efficacy, In vicarious involvements the individuals in the group often see the others' actions as simulations, when the stimuli does well, the individual's efficacy is enriched and when the stimuli does poorly their efficacy is reduced (Poce, 2010).

The findings of the present study also confirmed those of Braaksma et al. (2006) who found that in writing zone, vicarious learning is a way that overtly makes a difference between writing and learning to write and creates a relation between writing processes and the resulting writing product. Learners do not write rather they watch and scrutinize the writing processes of a model and the resulting texts of the model, they observed the composition of the models, recognize their writing strategies, assessed their composition, and

finally reflected overtly about the observed actions. This showed that observers used and established some standards for actual writing.

It can be concluded from the results of this study that by applying vicarious learning strategies to teach descriptive writing ability, learners can be more confident and excited to make progress.

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