AN ACTIVITY THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PERSUASIVE WRITING OF EFL LEARNERS: EVIDENCE FROM SELF-REGULATED STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT MODEL OF INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT
The present study examined the dominant persuasive writing activities of a group of EFL learners within the framework of self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) instructional model. To this end, 30 pre-intermediate EFL writers received a ten-session self-regulatory strategy development instruction on persuasive genre of writing with specific focus on strategies like planning, goal-setting, and monitoring. The learners who received SRSD instruction outperformed those who did not in writing persuasively. Additionally, the comparison of pretest and posttest scores on the persuasive probe revealed that SRSD instructional model resulted in prominent changes in the dominant persuasive writing activities of EFL learners. Moreover, the SRSD instructional treatment modified the past writing motivation of participants documented by an increase in their motivation as regards foreign language writing.

Keywords: Activity Theory, Dominant Writing Activities; Self-Regulated Strategy Development; Writing Motivation; Persuasive Writing

INTRODUCTION
Vygotskyan Sociocultural Theory is a widely utilized framework in the field of second language learning research (Ohta, 2000; Swain, 2000). Socioculturally-oriented theories are well-known in that they provide a framework through which one can study language learning as social practice. Such theories consider students as active participants in constructing learning processes, and try to examine the interaction between different factors involved (Fahim & Rajabi, 2015). One of the most intriguing theories in the tradition of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theories is Leontiev’s (1978) Activity Theory. Akin to sociocultural theory, activity theory highlights the social nature of learning and tries to scrutinize the individuals' activity systems as they engage in social interaction through the use of language as well as while learning it.

Activity theory is a unified account of Vygotsky’s (1978) original proposals on the nature and development of human behavior. The concept implies Vygotsky’s claim that human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Kuutti (1996) defines activity theory as "a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as development processes, both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time" (p. 25). In Lantolf's (2000) terms, activity theory refers to the system which results from the integration of artifacts into human activity, whether that activity is psychological or social.

Another major dimension in the domain of sociocultural theory is the concept of self-regulation or self-regulated learning. Pintrich (2000) defines self-regulated learning as "an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment” (p. 453). In the same vein, Zimmerman (1986) argues that self-regulation deals with how students personally activate, change, and sustain their learning practices in particular contexts. Self-regulated learners are said to achieve tasks with success because they make attempts to close the gap between their current status and goals (Leventhal & Cameron, 1987).

The concept of self-regulation has been recently applied to the field of second/ foreign language learning with specific reference to writing skill. Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999) hold that competency in writing...
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comes around from social aspects such as writers who function as models in standard writing. Several researchers (Zimmerman & Riesemberg, 1997; Hayes, 1996) acknowledge the role of self-regulation in writing skill. Based on Zimmerman & Riesemberg (1977), skilled writing depends upon high levels of self-regulation because writing is typically an intentional, self-initiated and self-sustained activity. A variety of strategies are utilized by expert writers utilize to regulate the environment, their behavior or covert processes while writing.

The achievement of self-regulation in writing is well-echoed instructional goal and interestingly, self-regulation strategies can be explicitly taught to beginning and developing writers. The social cognitive model of self-regulated writing (Flower & Hayes, 1980, cited in Harris et al., 2006) describes it as the self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions that writers use to attain various literacy goals including improving their writing skills and enhancing the quality of the compositions they create. Within this model, self-regulation occurs when a writer uses personal processes to regulate behavior or the environment strategically; for instance, regulating one’s behavior to write some pages each day.

The Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) developed by several researchers (Harris & Graham, 1996; Graham & Harris, 2000, 2003; Harris et al., 2006) refers to a model of instruction in writing skill the main function of which is teaching students strategies for planning and organizing their writing together with self-regulation procedures like monitoring and goal-setting. The research findings on SRSD point to the fact that SRSD instruction has positive impact on students’ writing performance (Graham & Harris, 2003).

According to Graham & Harris (2003), there are generally six stages involved in the SRSD model of writing instruction which include developing and activating background knowledge, discussing it, modeling it, memorizing it, supporting it, and finally independent performance.

Theoretical Background

Writing is one of the complex skills to master in first and foreign language learning. According to Richards (2002), the development of the writing skill encompasses something more than the accurate use of grammar and a good range of vocabulary, or linking the written words. Further to these, writing is assumed to be a mixture of several components the most crucial ones are suggested to be evaluated for a course (Raimes, 2002). As far as the teaching of writing in both first and second languages is concerned, two prominent approaches can be contrasted; i.e., product and process. In the former, the writing skill is often taught with an emphasis on punctuation, spelling, and correct usage where the teachers provided the students with comments on the finished products. In such an approach, as Raimes (2002) argues, writing merely consists of practicing grammatical exercises. In the latter approach; i.e., process, writing is conceived as a process encompassing four main stages (i.e. planning, drafting, revising, and editing) each of which functioning on their own rules, activities, and behaviors to be displayed (Seow, 2002). It follows from this approach that to master the processes involved in writing, learners need instruction. In other words, various strategies applied while performing a writing task have to be taught to the students. One example of such strategies is seen in what has come to be called self-regulation strategies. Several researchers (Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Riesemberg, 1997; Hayes, 1996) acknowledge the role of self-regulation in writing skill. It acts as a writing monitor. According to Zimmerman & Riesemberg (1997), skilled writing depends on high levels of self-regulation because writing is typically an intentional, self-initiated and self-sustained activity.

Activity Theory

Activity theory is a psychological meta-theory, or paradigm, with its roots in Vygotsky’s sociocultural-historical psychology. The concept implies Vygotsky’s claim that human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Kuutti (1996) defines activity theory as “a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different forms of human practices as development processes, both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time”(p. 25).

In Lantolf’s (2000) terms, activity theory refers to the system which results from the integration of artifacts into human activity, whether that activity is psychological or social. Lantolf goes on to suggest,
individual's mind in this theory comes under control of our cultural artifacts foremost among which is language. Vygotsky, according to Lantolf, argues that if psychology was to understand these functional systems it had to study their formation (i.e. their history) and activity instead of their structure. Vygotsky’s ideas were eventually elaborated on by A. N. Leontiev in his theory of activity, and while researchers since the time of Leontiev’s original formulations have modified aspects of the theory, his fundamental claims continue to reside at its core (Lantolf, 2000). In Leontiev’s theory, activity is not merely doing something; it is doing something that is motivated either by a biological need, such as hunger, or a culturally constructed need, such as the need to be literate in certain cultures (Lantolf, 2000). Needs change to motives once they become directed at a specific object. As a result, hunger will not become a motive until people decide to seek food; similarly, literacy does not become a motive for activity until people decide to learn to read and write.

The Concept of Activity

The term activity as utilized in the framework of activity theory has a broad connotation quite different from the common meaning of activity, action and task. Activity is understood in its sociocultural theoretic sense to comprise the behavior that is actually produced when a task is performed (Engestrom et al., 1999). Thus, activity is distinguished from task in that a task, according to Coughlan and Duff (1994), is a behavioral blueprint which is to be acted upon by students while activity refers to the kind of behavior actually produced when a task is performed.

Activity theory, in Feryok’s (2009) terms, distinguishes activity from action; activity concerns social motives at a broad level (such as formal education), whereas action is directed towards a goal which can be achieved by different operations, depending on the conditions; although operations can become automatized under changed conditions they can be ‘reactivated’ as consciously controlled.

Three Levels of Activity

Leontiev (1978) identifies the hierarchical levels of human activity by distinguishing ‘collective activity’ from ‘individual action’. In his idea, human activity is a system consisted of actions and operations. Therefore, the object of an activity can be transformed to outcomes through multiple steps and stages that encompass actions or chains of actions, which in turn comprise operations. Figure 2.1 below illustrates Leontiev’s model of human activity.

![Hierarchical levels of an activity](image)

Leontiev (1978) contends that the activity stratum is related to a subject’s motive, the action stratum to a goal, and the operation stratum to the conditions of the action. Therefore, from Leontiev’s perspective, a motive is conceptually broader than a goal, and it can be transformed into a set of concrete goals having clear start and end points.
On the top of the hierarchy are the activities which can be distinguished by the motives of individuals involved (Kuutti, 1996). At the second level lie actions which adopt immediate and defined goals. Individuals participating in the activity system, according to Kuutti, carry out actions in order to achieve a particular goal that contributes to the overall motive of the activity. Actions are distinguished by their goals. Kuutti further points out that when the corresponding model is satisfactory and the action has been practiced long enough, actions will be collapsed into operations where people are so fluent that they do not think so often about what they are doing.

**Empirical Studies on Second Language Writing (within the Framework of Activity Theory)**

Interestingly enough, some researchers argue that issues such as language and cultural diversity can be potentially analyzed through the lens of activity theory. In a study with participants in a writing course, Nelson and Kim (2001) found out that the cultural-historical backgrounds of the students (from different nationalities) influenced their motive for learning. Basing their findings on Engestrom's (1987) concept of expansive learning, they witnessed the ways in which students expanded and transformed their actions into a different activity. These writers conclude that through the act of comparing new learning and prior knowledge students may transcend the context of classroom and thereby transfer their new learning experience into other contexts.

Roebuck (2000) in a study based primarily on the written recall protocols came to the observation that despite the fact the learners were seemingly involved in the same kind of task, they are in reality engaged in a different activity. Coughlan and Duff (1994) analyzed recorded data gathered from non-native speakers engaged in a picture description task with an interviewer. The results revealed marked differences in how participants conceptualized the pragmatic purpose of the discourse event and in how they saw themselves in relation to the interviewer.

These differences were reflected in differences in the amount and quality of language they produced, and in the degree to which they sought to involve the interviewer in the task and establish interpersonal bonds through dialogic interaction. Thus, though participants were ostensibly engaged in the same task of picture description, they were each engaged in a different ‘activity’, where activity is understood in its sociocultural theoretic sense to comprise the behavior that is actually produced when a task is performed (Engestrom et al., 1999).

Taking an activity theory lens, Yasuda (2005) examined the writing process of ESL students in a natural academic context. Two major data sources were utilized: all the drafts students had written until they completed the final version, and retrospective interviews on students’ perception of their revision behaviors. The results showed that different activities were underway even though all of the participants were engaged in the same task. Interestingly, the findings also indicated that students’ beliefs about academic writing, which were shaped through their previous writing experiences, determined the nature of their activities during the writing process.

Coughlan and Duff (1994), taking a sociocultural approach to second language acquisition, showed that “the ‘same task’ does yield comparable results when performed by the same individual on two different occasions” (p.175), due to differing person perception of the task and differing interpersonal relationships, respectively. Coughlan and Duff’s research, like most others in the Vygotskian tradition, focused on mediated action rather than mediated activity, and most L2 research has emphasized on private speech and other communicative activities rather than composition.

One exception is the work of Prior (1995). Using a socio-historic approach to investigate the L2 writing of students in graduate seminars, Prior (1995), like Coughlan and Duff, found that the complex interactions of the histories and contexts of students and teachers-mediated task production and perception of writing tasks changed over time and differed among learners and teacher. In addition, however, he linked the patterns of activity, although varying among the seminars, to socio-historical and institutional factors.

Within the same line of inquiry, the present study set out to determine the changes, if any, in the dominant persuasive writing activities of EFL learners as a result of instruction they received on SRSD. Hence, the following research questions were put forward:
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1. Does self-regulatory strategy development (SRSD) enhance the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Does self-regulatory strategy instruction affect the kinds of activities Iranian EFL learners engage in as they perform the same task (persuasive writing)?

To this end, the following research hypothesis was formulated:

H0. Self-regulatory strategy development (SRSD) does not enhance the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method

This study examined the effects of explicit self-regulatory strategy instruction in the form of self-regulatory strategy development (SRSD) on the writing performance and writing activities of a group of EFL learners.

Participants

A group of 60 Iranian intermediate EFL learners were selected on the basis of their performance on an actual English proficiency test out of 85 students majoring English Language Teaching in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah Branch, Iran. The students whose scores on the language proficiency test fell within ±1 standard deviation of the mean score were selected as the main participants for the study. The sample comprised of 21 male and 39 female students with the age range of 19 to 26. 30 students were assigned to the experimental group and the rest (N= 30) were assigned to the control group. The participants had 4-7 years experience of English learning and none of them had received writing instruction based on the SRSD model nor were they aware of the various steps involved in writing persuasive essays. It has to be stressed at this point that out of the total 60 participants, four either did not take part in the post-administration of the persuasive writing test or simply did not include the essay parts as highlighted throughout the treatment.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in the present study. First, an actual test of language proficiency, validated and used by ETS at a worldwide test administration in 2003, was administered to the participants to ascertain their homogeneity in terms of English language proficiency prior to the instructional phase of the study. Second, the subjects were provided with two persuasive essay prompts both as pre- and post-test to write about. The persuasive prompts for pre- and post-tests were selected based on the current proficiency and the background knowledge of the subjects. Prompts involved specific statements or questions to write about. Keeping in mind the issues of reliability and validity, the overall quality of the essays (i.e., in pre- and post-tests) were assessed on the basis of a holistic rubric from 0 representing the lowest quality (no persuasive parts) to 10 representing the highest quality. This rubric was adopted from Miller (2013) and had been previously used in Mason and Shriner’s (2008) study and several others. Two experienced raters read through each composition attentively to obtain a general impression of overall writing quality. To avoid bias, the raters did not consider spelling errors and handwriting in rating the compositions. The inter-rater reliability of the two ratings was 0.88.

Procedures

Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) instructional model was implemented to teach students to plan and write persuasive essays with specific focus on the POW+TREE self-regulatory strategies. The instructional phase of the study was carried out on the basis of the six stages of SRSD instruction (Harris and Graham, 1996; Graham and Harris, 2003, Harris et al., 2006). These stages were accordingly incorporated into six writing lessons. The lessons were covered during eight 75-80 minute time periods for the experimental group. For a detailed discussion of the whole steps involved in the instructional
treatment refer to Fahim and Rajabi (2015) since the present article is part of doctoral dissertation some sections of which are reproduced here.

Besides examining the impact of SRSD model of instruction on the writing performance, this study aimed at investigating the writing behavior of the same learners adopting an activity theory perspective. To this end, qualitative data were gathered through the analysis of the participants’ essays. To determine whether the SRSD-based instruction as a novel learning experience influence the dominant writing activities of EFL learners (taking into consideration the principles of activity theory), the participants’ persuasive essays both of pre- and post-tests underwent precise content analysis. It has to be highlighted at this point that since the majority of the studies carried out in the domain of activity theory are either case studies or conducted with a few number of learners/participants; mainly due to the fact that a comprehensive account of the activity under scrutiny has to be reflected and also because of the depth of analysis which necessitates substantial time and energy, hence the data collected from the second experimental group (N= 8) were subject to qualitative analyses.

Assessing Writing Activities

Another purpose of the present study was to examine whether self-regulatory strategy instruction affect the kinds of activities Iranian EFL learners engage in as they perform the same writing task. The composition activities participants engaged in before and after the SRSD instruction were analyzed at the pretest and posttest so as to determine any variations in the so-called activities. For this purpose, a writing discourse analysis approach (Connor & Lauer, 1985) was implemented in analyzing the persuasive essays. The measure used in determining the differences in the writing activities of participants focused on the element of "coherence". It should be noted that this element was selected for analysis due to several reasons. First, coherence is an element most likely influenced by students' prior learning experiences (histories) and the social and educational contexts in which they are brought up; i.e., two factors closely tied to Vygotskyan sociocultural theory. Second, the SRSD instruction is assumed to implicitly influence it. Finally, coherence has been shown (Connor & Lauer, 1985) to be one of the key measures highlighted in evaluating persuasive essays.

Applying Bamberg's (1983; cited in Connor & Lauer, 1985) Coherence Scale, the categories of a) Focus (whether "the writer identifies the topic and does not shift or digress"), b) Context (whether the writer "orients the reader by describing the context or situation"), c) Organization (whether the writer "organizes details according to discernible plan that is sustained throughout the essay"), d) Cohesion (whether the writer skillfully uses cohesive ties such as lexical cohesion, conjunction, reference, and such to link sentences and/or paragraphs), e) closure (whether the writer wraps up with a statement that gives the reader a definite sense of closure), and f) Grammar (whether the writer makes few or no grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interrupt the discourse flow or reading process") were assessed in the compositions to figure out the kind of variation(s) in this particular writing activity of participants.

All of the eight participants’ persuasive essays (pre- and post-test) were analyzed adopting Connor & Lauer’s (1985) writing discourse analysis approach. Drawing on this approach, Bamberg's (1983; cited in Connor & Lauer, 1985) Coherence Scale was applied to analyze the content of the essays written by the participants. The essays were first analyzed by the researcher and second by an experienced composition instructor. The main purpose behind content analysis was to examine the extent to which the new learning experiences (SRSD instruction) as part of the overall learning history of the EFL learners modify/reshape their dominant writing activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First Research Question Results and Discussion

To respond to the first research question focusing on the effect of self-regulated strategy development on learners’ writing performance, the data was statistically analyzed. This was carried out to ensure that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their persuasive writing performance. Additionally, the results of the comparison of the two groups’ performances on the persuasive writing pre-test was taken as a baseline from which improvements in participants’ performance on the post-test...
could be measured. Therefore, an independent sample t-test was run to determine if the two groups performed significantly differently on the persuasive writing pre-test or not. It has to be stressed that the results of Shapiro-Wilk (test of normality) showed that the scores were normally distributed (p (0.141) > 0.05). The results of the t-test (Table 1) indicated no significant difference (p (0.174) > 0.05) in subjects' performance on the pre-test, that is, the two groups did not differ significantly in their performance on the persuasive writing pre-test.

Table 1: Independent t-test comparing the performance of the two groups on the persuasive writing pre-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VAR000 02</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>1.275</td>
<td>.23212</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.179</td>
<td>.21126</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After eight weeks of instruction, the participants in both experimental and control groups were administered the persuasive writing post-test. In order to see whether the performance of participants in the experimental group was significantly different from that of the control group, an independent t-test was run to analyze the persuasive writing scores obtained in post-test from the two groups. Table 2 below illustrates the statistical results of the persuasive writing post-test.

Table 2: Independent t-test comparing the performance of the two groups on the persuasive writing post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VAR000 02</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>27</td>
<td>4.4074</td>
<td>1.39392</td>
<td>.26826</td>
<td>5.484</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Sig. (2-Tailed) value as shown in Table 2 above is 0.000. This value is less than .05. Therefore, it is evident that there is a statistically significant difference between the performances of the learners in the two groups. In other words, since the Group Statistics box revealed that the Mean for the experimental group was greater than the Mean for the control group, we can conclude that participants in the experimental were able to write more persuasively than those in the control group.

The second question the present study investigated was “Does self-regulatory strategy instruction affect the kinds of activities Iranian EFL learners engage in as they perform the same task (persuasive writing)?” The main impetus behind the conduct of this study was to examine the effects of SRSD instructional model on the writing performance and writing motivation of pre-intermediate Persian EFL learners. 60 pre-intermediate students took part in the study whose writing performance was evaluated at baseline, i.e., prior to experiment, and after the treatment. The results of the study pointed to the finding that self-regulated strategy development model of instruction implemented to teach persuasive writing improved the learners’ writing ability. Specifically, the findings revealed that enriched with self-regulatory strategies the foreign language writing classes can benefit a lot from such a model in developing persuasive composition skills among low intermediate EFL learners.

The findings of the present study support previous research examining the effectiveness of the self-regulated strategy development on the writing performance of foreign language learners and participants with or without certain behavioral disorders. Several studies carried out with students with EBD (Santangelo et al., 2008; Mason et al., 2011; Mason & Shriner, 2008, among others) point to self-regulated strategy development as a useful strategy resulting in considerable improvement in the time,
length, number of essay parts and finally overall quality of persuasive essays composed by learners with EBD.

The findings of this study support the effectiveness of SRSD instructional procedures in improving the writing performance of students with specific reference to pre-intermediate EFL learners. The results of data analysis revealed that the writing scores of the participants on the post test were substantially higher than those on the pre test. The findings of the study adds to the body of research on the relevance of SRSD to teach writing to students with certain behavioral disorders in general and to foreign language learners in particular (Graham & Harris, 1994; De and Graham, 2002; Graham & Harris, 2000; Harris & Graham, 2006; Harris et al., 2006).

Second Research Question Results and Discussion
The persuasive writing activities of the participants in pre- and post-test administrations were analyzed based on Bamberg's (1983, cited in Connor & Lauer, 1985) Coherent Scale which has been specifically developed and validated for assessing persuasive essays. The scale makes use of six categories to assess the coherence in persuasive essays. These categories include Focus (whether "the writer identifies the topic and does not shift or digress"), b) Context (whether the writer "describes the context or situation"), c) Organization (whether the writer "organizes details according to discernible plan that is sustained throughout the essay"), d) Cohesion (whether the writer skillfully uses cohesive ties such as lexical cohesion, conjunction, reference, and such to link sentences and/or paragraphs), e) Closure (whether the writer wraps up with a statement that gives the reader a definite sense of closure), and f) Grammar (whether the writer makes few or no grammatical and/or mechanical errors that interrupt the discourse flow or reading process)

The persuasive essays written by the participants in both pre- and post-testing phases underwent in-depth content analysis procedures to figure out the kind of variation(s) in their writing activities. The Analysis of Participants' Writing Activities Pre- and Post-test
The persuasive writing ability of the students was first assessed based on a holistic scale. The same essays were assessed again prior to the intervention to analyze specific activities different individuals engaged in while performing the same task, i.e., persuasive writing.

The results of the analysis of writing activities at pre-test revealed that the individual participants' activities did vary a lot from each other. In other words, the students wrote a number of different forms while performing the same task. Additionally, the writing activities the participants engaged in were often incomplete and at times contained irrelevant information.

To start with one participant's performance, Abdoreza Farokhi, the essay was full of sentences which did not contribute any significant elements to the overall message; that is, to persuade the reader to have their children do some of the house chores. In more specific terms, in the first paragraph the sentences sounded much like descriptive than persuasive.

Another student, Parisa Naseri, simply failed to include a clear thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. What ties participant put emphasis on was the duties of parents without any reference to the main focus of the study, children duties. This way, the essay did not commence with a coherent, significant, and influential paragraph. In other words, this participant failed to identify the main topic and digress away from it.

As far as the second element (context/situation) of the coherence scale is concerned, the same student was also unable to orient the reader appropriately towards the issue. Instead of describing the situation needed to encourage the reader to read on; the writer moves forward spirally repeating the first sentence of the introduction within the same paragraph. Throughout the rest of the essay, Parisa's writing activities continued to be incoherent and without a discernible order. That is, no specific organization (the third element in the scale) was traceable throughout the entire essay.

The fourth element in Bamberg's Coherence Scale goes with the use of cohesive devices to connect ideas. Surprisingly, there were just 1-2 cohesive devices to connect ideas in the whole essay. This in itself points to the dearth of a unified and dynamic writing activity system. Finally, there were hardly any mechanics such as comma, semi-colon, etc. throughout the essay.
After the instructional intervention, the essays written by participants at post-test were carefully analyzed by the researcher and a colleague of him. In case of post-test persuasive essays, the same students' writing activities were scrutinized once more to determine whether SRSD model of writing instruction exerts any specific impact on the composition activities the students engaged in. With reference to the element of focus, the writers' activities seem much more straightforward as compared to pre-test performance. One reason behind this could be found in the kind of emphasis which was put on the importance of a clear and well-developed topic sentence/thesis statement during SRSD instructional treatment. Obviously, the participants were quite successful in setting the scene (identifying the context) after they received the treatment. Therefore, from the perspective of activity theory, the new learning activity within a supporting discourse community helped participants build upon and reorganize their dominant activity systems in the domain of foreign language persuasive writing. In fact, the kind of scaffolded instruction delivered by the researcher/instructor throughout the intervention has had considerable influence on the past writing activities of the participants.

Such assistance allegedly led to certain modifications in the way(s) students approached and internalized the activity at hand. In case of the second element in the Coherence Scale, context, Parisa was able to set the context successfully (see appendices). Interestingly enough, this participant was successful in mixing the first two elements together in two sentences. That is, the very first sentences in the introductory paragraph were devoted to identifying the topic and describing the context. With regard to the third element, organizing activity, Parisa improved a lot from pre-test to post-test performance. It is not less likely that the instructional intervention presented to the participants in a verbatim manner encouraged them to take care of a clear and discernible plan throughout the essay. The same holds true for the cohesive element in the post-test essay writing performance. Since the lessons taught in the course of treatment emphasized the importance of including three reasons or more to persuade the reader, the participants were watchful to make use of cohesive devices like ordinal numbers to arrange the so-called reasons according to their importance. As it might be clear, SRSD instructional model affected this particular writing activity, as well.

Parisa wrapped up the post-test persuasive essay with this sentence, "At the end, I think parents should let children do house chores ...". The statement clearly signals the end of the essay. However, she did not include a closing phrase/sentence as such in her pre-test essay. Although the element of Grammar across the two essays (pre- and post-test ones) did not change substantially, however, there were some improvements over the pre-test performance. In so far as the intervention put very little emphasis on the grammatical aspect of the persuasive essay writing, this lack of modification in the element of Grammar does not seem uncommon.

The analysis of the other participants' essays after the treatment revealed similar results. Generally, much of the experimental group participants' confidence in their ability to perform the task successfully after the treatment had increased dramatically. This observation highlights the importance of the new learning experiences in the form of scaffolded instruction in improving and strengthening the activity systems of the learners.

4.2.2 Writing activities discussion: In activity theoretical terms, the participants' and the instructor's socio-historical backgrounds have a lot to do with the maintenance, weakening, or strengthening the internal ties among different elements of the dominant activity systems. This study presented scaffolded SRSD instruction to participants in ways that both students and instructor interacted with each other to reinforce the previous efficient activities and to encourage the new constructive ones. To put it in a nutshell, the SRSD instructional intervention seems to have been successful in internalizing and activating jointly constructed activities. Traditional and more cognitively-oriented approaches to teach second/foreign writing have for long focused on the individual student's linguistic abilities divorced from the social interactions which are thought to play a vital role in developing learners' language skills. The model practiced and examined in the present study reflects a more socio-cultural and socio-historical (Vygotsky, 1978; Leontiev, 1978; Lantolf, 2000) approach to teach writing skill; the one basically informed by the principles of activity
theory. Such a model further prioritizes the significant role of discourse communities and shared historical experiences together with scaffolded instruction.

To discuss the results obtained from the analysis of participants’ persuasive essays in relation to the results of similar past studies does not seem that time consuming in that perhaps the only study to date carried out on persuasive writing within activity theory perspective is that of Coughlan and Duff (1991). Coughlan and Duff (1994), taking a sociocultural approach to second language acquisition, showed that “the ‘same task’ does yield comparable results when performed by the same individual on two different occasions” (p.175), due to differing person perception of the task and differing interpersonal relationships, respectively. Coughlan and Duff’s work, like most others in the Vygotskian tradition emphasized on private speech and other communicative activities rather than composition.

However, ending their article, Coughlan and Duff point to a limitation in their study which the present investigation seems to have overcome. There, these writers point out that the subjects’ story-telling production activities were affected by the interviewer's knowledge and expertise. On the contrary, the composition activities the participants of the present study engaged in while performing the same tasks at two different situations were not influenced by the researcher's knowledge or expertise. In other words, the researcher did not contribute anything to the participants throughout the whole essay writing process.

**Conclusion**

As far as activity theoretically oriented studies on technology (e.g., computer) are concerned, instead of solely focusing on technology and its properties, future studies examine the ways in which technology can shape human activity.

Activity theory can potentially provide researchers with a flexible view of participation with specific reference to multiple perspectives such as local and global positions. It follows that the potential capacity of activity theory in representing multiple perspectives/voices can be particularly built upon by researchers in that it provides them with a strong means to account for the dynamic interplay between the teacher as the one (subject) who designs and guides through the learning activity and the student as one who tries to achieve the outcome of the activity. Accordingly, further studies are called upon to examine whether teachers and students share the same meanings of the learning activity at hand and determine how other factors influence learners understanding of the learning activity.

The results of the present study revealed that self-regulated strategy instruction together with teaching certain specific strategies can potentially enhance the writing performance and motivation of pre-intermediate EFL learners. Obviously, the self-regulatory strategies seem to be an asset for the novice and pre-intermediate writers to develop the knowledge and experience to successfully apply the general and specific strategies to particular genres of writing in the second/foreign language. Additionally, the results obtained from the present investigation corroborate the findings of the previous studies highlighting the importance of scaffolded instruction on the part of the teacher in the form of explicit teaching of self-regulated strategies to improve the writing performance of students. Nevertheless, it has to be reiterated at this point that the present study broadened the scope of SRSD research to foreign language contexts where learners need explicit instruction on certain self-regulatory and specific writing strategies to help them express their ideas in the foreign language code, i.e., English.

Gender differences may be taken into consideration in future studies to examine the extent to which such variable can influence the success of the SRSD model of writing instruction. The present study applied the SRSD model to teach persuasive genre of writing to pre-intermediate EFL learners. Therefore, future research may explore the effect of the model on other genres of writing. Finally, within the paradigm of activity theory, studies are needed to investigate the writing activities of EFL/ESL learners across other genres of written expression.

**REFERENCES**


Research Article


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