

## **The Effect of Brainstorming as a Pre-writing Strategy on EFL Advanced Learners' Writing Ability**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed at investigating the effect of using brainstorming and its subcategories (listing, question and answer, outlining) as a pre-writing strategy. Participants of the study were 60 Iranian EFL advanced learners who were both male and female. Instruments of the study were pretest, instruction, posttest and a questionnaire at the end of the treatment in order to measure the attitude of students toward instruction. Results of the study revealed that there was not any significant relationship between brainstorming, its subcategories and EFL learners writing development. In addition, findings showed that there was not any significant difference between males and females in terms of using brainstorming and the three subcategories.

**Keywords:** brainstorming, instruction, listing, outlining, question and answer, pre-writing strategies

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Brown (1987), the natural order of learning a second language is listening, speaking, reading and writing. Reading and writing need to be taken into account as an advanced stage of language development. One of the highly complicated and difficult processes for the most of second language learners is writing. Despite its difficulties, it is very important for many students because through writing, they can show their knowledge in content areas (Hinkel, 2006). According to Richards (2002), one of the most difficult skills for L2 learners to master is certainly writing. This difficulty is not only in the facets of generating and organizing ideas but also in translating these ideas into a readable text. Highly complex skills are involved in writing. L2 writers should pay attention to both higher-level skills like planning and organizing and lower level skills

such as spelling, punctuations, word choice and so on, and if language proficiency of writers is weak, the difficulty becomes more obvious.

According to Mogahed (2013), for many people, especially young writers, starting to write is a problem. Tomkins (2001) believed that pre-writing is the most ignored stage. Thorne (1993) discussed that the most important skill to emphasize and practice extensively in fundamental writing classes is pre-writing. The very beginning of writing for many writers is a difficult part of writing. It is worthy to spend a lot of time and attention on pre-writing because it assists to solve a problem called "writer's block". Go (1994) debated that in order for teachers of English as a second language to assist learners to acquire good language skill, they could employ pre-writing activities at the beginning stage of instruction. Pre-writing engages energizing student participation in thinking, talking, group interaction, and skeletal writing activities that become parts of writing task.

Pre-writing activities assist learners to both acquire the target language more efficiently and make interpersonal, thinking and planning skill that can be applied in other fields. Mogahed (2013) believed that whenever and wherever we want, we could use of pre-writing activities because what occurs in pre-writing is handling and arranging. The view of Shameem (1988) toward writing is a nonlinear and restated process and consists of four stages: prewriting, composing/writing, revision and proofreading/editing. The first stage of writing is prewriting in which the writer begins to think, find and make the ideas to be used in the next step. The writer should write his/her first draft at the second stage. At the third stage, the student is required to monitor the coherence and cohesion, styles and syntax as well as grammar while s/he has done proofreading. In order to sure that the essay is perfect in the final stage editing is done. Students should know these four stages in order to be informed about the process of writing.

Prewriting is the first phase of writing which is recognized as a source of composing (Huff & Kline, 1987). All the activities that intervene between the first decision to write and the beginning of a maintained first draft are related to pre-writing phase so named as pre drafting. Many investigators begin to insist that students use different ways in order to explore a topic before writing a draft, such as making use of mediation, journals, analogies, brainstorming, clustering, grouping and free writing (Ashwell, 2000; Barnnet, 1989; Davis, 2005; Crawford & Smolkbwski, 2008; Muncie, 2002).

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Brainstorming strategy**

According to Scane, Guy and Wenstrom (1991), brainstorming activities encourage students who do not usually like to write by creating a stress-free atmosphere. Thus in an EFL environment where students normally make effort to do their writing tasks, a nonthreatening atmosphere can help them develop their writing skill. Good writers are

those who can think well; therefore, one way of expressing thought is writing (Harmer, 2001). It seems useful to prepare situations in which students think about topic before starting composition.

Brainstorming strategy can help students use their prior knowledge in their writing activity and recognize what skills and information they have and what they need to know (Rao, 2007). Moreover, teaching students different brainstorming techniques in class is reasonable because it might assist them to cultivate their writing and create ideas that are necessary in second language acquisition (Harmer, 2001). Although the ideas created in this stage may or may not be directly related to the topic, brainstorming is a valuable technique in developing students' ideas before they actually start their writing task (Harmer, 2001). One of the most important features of brainstorming is that it does not need any preparation and it can be used at any level of education and under any circumstance (Buzan, 1993).

Brainstorming was popularized in 1953 by Osborn in his book. He claimed that learners can enhance their creative output by the help of brainstorming. A number of rules should be considered during the brainstorming session:

- No criticism of ideas
- Building on what others have suggested
- Strange and wild idea are accepted
- Welcoming the large quantities of ideas.

The purpose of brainstorming is to guide people to new ways of thinking and break from the common way of reasoning. Brainstorming is the automatic act of note taking of ideas in preparation for different steps of writing. Some confirm to be helpful, others can be rejected it (Ledbetter, 2010). Moreover, MacDowell (1999) defined brainstorming as "the act of defining a problem or ideas and coming up with anything related to the topic. No matter how remote a suggestion may sound. All of these ideas are recorded and evaluated only after the brainstorming is completed" (p.5).

Tomlinson (1998) agrees with McDowell that brainstorming is a prewriting activity in which a writer taking notes everything he can think of on as a set of subject without deciding the thoughts. Then, the writer looks at the result for patterns or other helpful data about the subject. One of the important points about brainstorming is that there should be no tension on the writer. Learners should simply open their minds to whatever pops into their brains.

As a matter of fact, the issue of teaching writing EFL/ESL by starting with brainstorming and its relation to learners' motivation has become increasingly important to instructors as well as to learners. Although, having been EFL teachers of English for a long time, we have had the chance to consider that many EFL teachers apply various methods for brainstorming without evaluating how they impact learners writing motivation.

According to Mogahed (2013), most of the problems cannot be solved automatically by the first ideas that come to mind. It is important to take into account many possible solutions in order to get the best solution. Therefore, one of the best ways is brainstorming. Brainstorming is a beneficial ways to get start or generating new ideas. When students are familiar with the process they can apply this activity on their selves when they are stuck, revising their work or moving on to a new phase. Bobb-wolff (1996) debated that brainstorming can be a useful and improving instrument in the EFL contexts and as a means of showing students that they are collectively able to generate more ideas to enrich their learning process then they believed possible. This in turn, leads to enhance in their autonomy of learning and self-responsibility. However, most importantly, it develops the quality of students' activity and production in class.

According to Mogahed (2013), asking questions is one of the most common ways of raising topic. Journalist uses of these very simple questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Responding these questions in the first step does not seem very hard. However, it is precisely when the writer has difficulty in answering a "why" question that a real paper is beginning. Students focus upon listener as they think of what the readers need to know. Responding to these questions will form the foundation of composition. Therefore; the journalists' questions are influential way to expand a great deal of information about a topic very quickly. Although learning to ask the suitable questions which be related to topic takes practice. Moreover, Gorrell (1996) makes a case for students applying a focused, carefully phrased to question as a base for pre-writing and writing. As opposed to a thesis sentences which can more easily lead them confused.

Another type of pre-writing activity that writers find useful is listing. Means that doing only what its name proposed: possible topics are listed afterward subtitles of things the writer could mention about each topic.

## **Review of empirical studies**

Fawzi and Hussein (2013) conducted a comparative study on enhancing students' motivation to write essays through brainstorming. Participants of the study were twelve female students at the Post Foundational level, Qatar University. Instruments of the study were free brainstorming sheet instruction and guided journalistic brainstorming sheet instruction. After classifying students into (3-4) groups two sheets were given to each group and asked them to select a topic and complete the brainstorming sheets. As the study proved both types of brainstorming were motivating to students but participants preferred guided brainstorming.

Ibnian (2011) examined a study on the effect of using the brainstorming technique on essay writing in EFL class. Eighty-four first secondary grade students from Amman public education schools participated in the study. They were classified into control and experimental groups. Instruments of the study were pre and post essay writing and a checklist. Findings of the study indicated that brainstorming technique had a positive

effect on the writing skill of EFL students in such aspects as content and organization, mechanics of writing, language use and skills emerged from creative thinking abilities (fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration).

Rao (2007) conducted a study on the effects of brainstorming strategy instruction on learners' writing performance and perception. One hundred eighty sophomore students in the foreign languages college at Jiangxi Normal University in Chinese were participants of this study. Subjects of the study divided into three groups. Two of them were experimental groups and another one as a control group. Instruments of the study were pre and posttest and attitudinal survey. The study's findings shed light on the significant effects of explicit instruction of brainstorming strategy on writing performance and the questionnaires indicated the positive attitudes of learners toward brainstorming strategy.

Maghsoudi and Haririan (2013) believed that brainstorming strategy applied as controversial issue in history of ELT and it has long been considered with suspicion by language teachers therefore, it has been neglected as a valid activity for language practice and development. However, regarding the nature of brainstorming and creative thinking we can mention that there are important elements in teaching process which causes it appropriate for being applied in language teaching procedure. According to Osborn (1953), brainstorming can assist the learners to transfer their ideas from the brain to tongue or to the numbers that related to skill specifically to writing. In writing process as a means to increase learners' motivation to write essay.

Manouchehry, Farhangi, Fatemi, and Qaviketf (2014) conducted a study on the effect of two brainstorming strategies on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners writing skill. Results of the study revealed that brainstorming strategies instruction had positive effects on EFL learners writing achievement. It also made them responsible for their better learning.

Shorofat (2007) study on the effect of using brainstorming and "synectic" in developing creative writing skills of ninth female students and their attitudes toward writing in Arabic. Results indicated that applying brainstorming and "synectic" were effective in improving students' creative writing skills in terms of content, organization, style, and mechanics of writing. Results also revealed that was no effect of the implemented strategies on students' attitudes toward writing.

Maghsoudi and Haririan (2013) carried out a study on the impact of brainstorming strategies on Iranian EFL learners writing skill regarding their social class students. Results of the study provided the evidence that the instruction of brainstorming strategy had a positive effect on EFL learners writing improvement and also make them more active.

As to the purpose of the study, the following research questions were posed.

- Is there any relationship between brainstorming, its subcategories instruction and EFL learners writing development?
- Is there any difference between males and females in terms of using the brainstorming strategy and its subcategories?

Based on the above research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated.

- There is not any relationship between brainstorming instruction and EFL learners writing achievement.
- There is a significance differences between male and female in terms of using the brainstorming strategy and its subcategories.

## METHOD

### Participants and setting

The participants who took part in this investigation consisted of 60 Persian native speakers. They were both male and female and in both experimental and control groups. Experimental groups included (14 males and 18 females) and control groups (13 males and 15 females). All of them studied English as a foreign language in a private institute in Bushehr, Iran. The study took place in their 14<sup>th</sup> level, and the book that they studied was *New Interchange*. The average ages of them were 15 to 36.

### Instruments

The instruments which applied in the present study were essay writings as a pretest and posttest in the first phase of the study. In addition, the data in the second part of the research were collected through a questionnaire. This questionnaire was created by the researcher that was completed at the end of the period in order to seek writing information. The questionnaire was administered and piloted before the study started. It was both valid and reliable; therefore, the result of it was reported in data analysis section. All items of this questionnaire were in Persian. This questionnaire consisted of fifteen statements that were classified into the following parts: attitudes toward brainstorming strategy and its subcategories: listing, outlining and question and answer. Each item of the questionnaire was rated on five points from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

### Design

Design of this research was mix method means that in present study the researcher used of both quantitative and qualitative instruments to collect data. In the first part of the study a pretest and posttest used as a qualitative instrument and the data in the second part collected through a questionnaire which considered as a quantitative tool for data collection.

## Procedures

Sixty Iranian advanced learners were the participants of this study. Their classes were held 3 days in a week. Before starting the instruction, a pre-test was administered in order to learner write based on their background knowledge and compare the results of the instruction at the end of period. Brainstorming as a pre-writing strategy and its subcategories such as listing, question and answer, and outlining were instructed to learners during 16 sessions and each session 45 minutes.

In the first session, the researcher generally talked about pre-writing strategies and their effects on writing improvements. In the second session, the instruction of pre-writing strategies started. At the beginning of every session, the strategy was defined and its advantages and effects on writing improvement were discussed. Then several examples were written on the board and next three tasks were given to them during three other sessions. In each session, the participants had 30 minutes to write about the topic in the class. Before starting writing, they had to use related pre-writing strategy which they learned in their drafts. Then they developed their ideas about the topic. After that, their papers were corrected and returned to them in order to know their errors and mistakes and avoid them in their next writings.

Regarding the topics, the students were supposed to write on several topics from the book by Bagheri, Riasati and Rahimi (2012) were selected and the advisor confirmed topics, then the researcher gave the topics to an IELTS teacher, and selected the best 10 of topics together that were considered to suit students' interest, personal information and they had enough ideas, information, and knowledge about the topics in order to develop them.

## Scoring

Two IELTS teachers rated the participants' written texts. Then the reliability value between two scores was checked. The texts were corrected according to Writing Band Description (Bagheri, et al. 2012). The writings were rated based on four aspects of writing: task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource and grammatical range and accuracy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of research question 1

The first research question of the study addressed the relationship between basic prewriting strategies instruction and EFL writing development. To answer this question, the researcher ran the independent samples t-test.

As mentioned earlier, all the participants took the IELTS writing test. In order to examine whether the writing scores were reliable or not, a second rater was asked to score the pretest and the posttest. Then, a Pearson correlation was run to obtain the

degree of go-togetherness between the two sets of writing scores for pretest and posttest. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2:

**Table 1.** Correlation between Pretest Scores

Correlations		Pretest1	Pretest2
Pretest 1	Pearson Correlation	1	.962**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
Pretest 2	Pearson Correlation	.962**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

**Table 2.** Correlation between Post-test Scores

Correlations		Post-test1	Post-test2
Post-test1	Pearson Correlation	1	.961**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
Post-test2	Pearson Correlation	.961**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

According to Tables 1 and 2, the correlations between the raters' scores for pretest and posttest are .962 and .961 respectively. Thus, based on the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula (Henning, 1987), inter-rater coefficient for both pretest and posttest is .98. It can be concluded that the two sets of scores for both pretest and post-test are highly reliable. Then, the averages of the raters' scores were taken as the raw scores for future computations.

To monitor the effect of strategy instruction on writing, the researcher compared the performance of the groups at the end of the program by running an independent samples t-test comparing the mean scores of the two groups on the post-test. Results are demonstrated below.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics of Experimental and Control Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test	Experimental	32	5.15	.72	.12
	Control	28	2.02	.82	.15



**Table 4.** Independent Sample T-test to Compare Post-test Scores

	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. 2- tailed	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.063	.307	15.706	58	.000	3.1294	.19925	2.7306	3.5283
Equal variances not assumed			15.573	54.332	.000	3.1294	.20095	2.7266	3.5322

The results of Table 4 clearly show that the two groups performed differently on the posttest (sig. =.000,  $p < .05$ ), which firmly rejects the quality of the performance in the posttest between the experimental and control groups. According to Table 3, the experimental group (mean=5.15) gained better results than the control group (mean=2.02) in the post-test.

Afterwards, a paired t-test was used to compare the results of pretest and posttest in both experimental and control group. Table 5 and 6 below illustrate the pertaining results.

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Post-test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-Experimental	3.6641	32	.75029	.13263
	Post-Experimental	5.1563	32	.72332	.12787
Pair 2	Pre-Control	2.1161	28	.74994	.14173
	Post-Control	2.0268	28	.82028	.15502

Table 6. Paired Sample T-test between Pretest and Post-test Scores of Groups

		Paired Differences					t	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Interval Difference	Confidence of the			
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest	-	.43294	.07653	-1.64828	-1.33610	-	31	.000
	Post- test	1.4929					19.47		
Pair 2	Pretest	.08929	.52799	.09978	-.11545	.29402	-.865	27	.379
	Post- test								

Since the  $p$  value for the experimental group (Pair1) is .000 ( $p < .05$ ), it can be inferred that there is a significant difference between the performance of the experimental group participants in the pretests and post-test. The participants in their post-test (mean=5.15) outperformed with regard to their first performance (mean=3.66) before instruction. It denotes that the basic pre-writing strategies instruction considerably improves their application of strategies to overcome difficulties in the face of writing. With regard to Table 6, considering the control group (Pair 2), the pretest and the post-test scores did not show any significant difference (Sig. =.379).

The difference between pretest and post-test score of the experimental group was considered as the writing development score for the further computations. To investigate the relationship between brainstorming, its subcategories instruction and EFL learners writing development, the correlation analysis was used. Table 7 shows the pertaining results.

**Table7.** Correlation between the Brainstorming, its Subcategories Instruction and EFL Learners Writing Development

	Writing Development	
Brainstorming	Pearson Correlation	.324
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.071
	N	32
Listing	Pearson Correlation	-.230
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.206
	N	32
Outlining	Pearson Correlation	.064
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.728
	N	32
Question and Answer	Pearson Correlation	-.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.936
	N	32

Based on the results presented in Table 7, there is not any significant relationship between the brainstorming, its subcategories instruction and EFL learners writing development.

## Analysis of research question 2

As mentioned earlier, the second research question of the study aimed at investigating the difference between males and females in terms of using the brainstorming strategy and its subcategories. Therefore the independent sample t-test was run to explore the difference between males and females based on using the brainstorming strategy and its subcategories. Tables 8 and 9 show the results of the descriptive statistics and the independent sample t-test.

**Table 8.** Descriptive Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Brainstorming	Female	18	4.0556	.38348	.09039
	Male	14	4.2381	.40146	.10730
Listing	Female	18	4.0556	.87260	.20567
	Male	14	4.1429	.36314	.09705
Outlining	Female	18	4.2222	.42779	.10083
	Male	14	4.1429	.36314	.09705
Question and Answer	Female	18	4.2778	.46089	.10863
	Male	14	4.1429	.36314	.09705

**Table 9.** Independent Sample t-test of male and female groups on the Brainstorming and its Subcategories

		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. 2- tailed	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Lower Upper	
Brainstorming	Equal variances assumed	.098	.757	- 1.309	30	.201	-.1825	.13947	-.4673	.10229
	Equal variances not assumed			- 1.301	27.433	.204	-.1825	.14029	-.4701	.10511
Listing	Equal variances assumed	.678	.417	-.350	30	.728	-.0873	.24909	-.5960	.42142
	Equal variances not assumed			-.384	23.866	.704	-.0873	.22742	-.5568	.38222
Outlining	Equal variances assumed	1.308	.262	.555	30	.583	.07937	.14292	-.2125	.37124
	Equal variances not assumed			.567	29.726	.575	.07937	.13995	-.2065	.36529
Question and Answer	Equal variances assumed	3.636	.066	.899	30	.376	.13492	.15014	-.1717	.44154
	Equal variances not assumed			.926	29.986	.362	.13492	.14567	-.1625	.43243

According to Table 9, there is not any significant difference between males and females in terms of using the brainstorming and its subcategories (Listing, outlining and question and answer).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of pre-writing strategy instruction brainstorming and its subcategories namely- listening, outlining and question and answer on the improvement of Iranian EFL learners writing skill. Results of the study revealed that there is not any significant relationship between the brainstorming and its subcategories instruction. Second results of the study also indicated that there is not any significant difference between males and females in terms of using brainstorming and its subcategories (listing, outlining, question and answer).

In the light of the above-mentioned findings, the study has considerable implications that may assist learners, instructors, and curriculum designers in EFL settings to increase and improve their performances. In order for learners to become strategic writers, they need to know different pre-writing strategies. Therefore, teachers ought to teach learners various facilitating pre-writing strategies to equip them with enough knowledge of strategies.

In future prospective studies, it is recommended that the number of participants be increased in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings. It is recommended to include other important factors such as age, the effect of other strategies and other subcategories of brainstorming such as, clustering, word map, etc. on writing development. Another recommendation could be teaching pre-writing strategies to learners at different levels of proficiency and education e.g., intermediate, upper intermediate, school age, university students, as well as those who learn English for specific purposes and students with different educational backgrounds.

This study had several limitations. First, the length of experiment was not long enough to fully determine the effectiveness of pre-strategies instruction. Due to time constraints, the researcher did not have enough time to make use of all different pre-writing strategies and students could not effectively practice strategies which were introduced in the classroom because the study was conducted during a portion of class sessions. Second, participants differed in their age range and social level. Finally, learners' educational level and field of study were not the same. Only they were similar in their level of language proficiency.

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