BRAINSTORMING WITH OUTLINING AND DEPICTING IN DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Le Thi Van[*]

Van Hien University

Abstract: Outlining has been used as a powerful brainstorming strategy to boost writing performance. However, no method is panacea. This comparative study examines (1) the effects of Outlining and the new one called Depicting on descriptive writings in terms of the number of ideas generated, content and the organization of ideas, and (2) students' viewpoints towards these strategies. A cross-intervention research design was implemented on two experimental groups exposed to either strategy. The data were collected from over 160 descriptive paragraphs, 21 questionnaires and 6 purposefully selected case-study interviews. The findings indicated more positive results for Depicting over Outlining in facilitating the writers to generate ideas. Meanwhile, there was no clear distinction in terms of content and idea organization performed with Outlining versus Depicting. Also, major findings revealed the participants' controversial viewpoints on strengths and weaknesses of both strategies, and their preference towards the strategies was not always similar.

1. Introduction

Vietnamese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners gain less interest and motivation in writing in English than in other macro language skills (Le Van Canh, 2000). The importance of prewriting strategies in improving writing performance has been emphasized by a considerable number of researchers, teachers and educators (Holmes, 2003; Rahimpour & Safarie, 2011). Up to the present, a predominant and powerful prewriting strategy widely used in the prewriting stage has been outlining (Rivera, 2011). However, outlining is not a panacea, therefore, it is not able to facilitate effectively for all teaching and learning contexts including descriptive writings. For improving descriptive writing performance and satisfying preferences of diverse learners, more alternatives for prewriting strategies should be developed.

In the meantime, the use of pictorial presentation has proved its effectiveness in several fields. A large number of viewpoints confirm the effectiveness of pictorial presentation. For instance, Christianakis (2011) confirmed that the use of images could help readers sense the objects in a clear and emotional way. In the field of literature, art, fashion designing, pictorial presentation clearly enhanced the quality of performance (Gorman & Eastman, 2010; Noskin, 2000). According to Hope (2000), drawing could help develop creative ideas. A various form of visualizing ideas is mind mapping. In the meantime, 'Mind mapping is a powerful tool for assisting any form of writing' (Nisreen, 2016). In addition, a number of studies have been conducted and proved the effectiveness of pictorial application. In the field of EFL learning and teaching, drawing functions as transition to writing and a way of children's communication (Dreifus, 2011). Dreifus (2011) concluded this when he asked the children to draw before writing and found out that the children communicated more ideas than when they only wrote. A similar study to Dreifus's study was carried out by Krishnan et al., (2011). However, the

[*] Email: vanlt@vhu.edu.vn

participants were young learners. They figured out that young learners could improve their writings and enhance their motivation in writing thanks to the use of pictorial presentation. The use of pictures in writing, when students are given a picture and look at it to write, has been proved to be effective in enhancing performance of recount text according to findings from the study of Kurniati (2016). Results from another study by Azfianty (2016) showed that students' scores of recount texts were improved by using picture sequences.

However, the previously conducted studies merely examine the effects of pictorial presentation on children, young writers and solely in certain fields. Also, the pictures were not created by the students themselves who are supposed to do it. Therefore, this way may probably limit these writers' freedom and creativity and do not actually focus on the writers' ideas of their interests. In the researcher's beliefs, the use of pictorial presentation can function as an effective prewriting strategy to help these EFL with descriptive writings. Before making use of pictorial presentation as an alternative for prewriting strategies in this oriented teaching and learning context, it is essential to scientifically test its effectiveness in that context.

In the current study, the use of pictorial presentation prompted a different variation, labeled *depicting*. Depicting is defined as a prewriting strategy in which ideas are presented through sketching with or without note words. Basic lines and basic shapes are the main tools a student could use while depicting. The student's final product is a depictive presentation that serves as a container of ideas, meticulous care on the depictive presentation and comprehensiveness of it to the outsiders is not required. Therefore, this final product can be messy, but should be as informative.

2. Aims of the study

This study is a comparative investigation into effects of depicting prewriting strategy and outlining prewriting strategy on EFL adult learners in terms of descriptive writing performance and preference. In terms of performance, three components were examined: the number of ideas generated, the content and the organization of ideas. In terms of preference, learners' preference towards and their viewpoints on the effects of these strategies with regards to the investigated aspects on writing performance were explored.

The current study takes its crucial roles in reinforcing strengths as well as weaknesses of the use of pictorial presentation in general, of the depicting strategy in specific and of outlining. It also helps deepen features as well as potential uses of these strategies. Positive aspects of depicting found over outlining are expected to bring about a new alternative for prewriting strategies to help EFL learners with descriptive writings. Otherwise, results confirmed the predominant use of outlining. It is expected that this study would also shed light on future research of the same interest.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Twenty EFL adult learners aged from 18 to 27 and from a variety of majors were randomly selected to participate in the study. These learners were at elementary level of English. They were randomly distributed into the experimental group 1 (6 females and 4 males)

and the experimental group 2 (7 females and 3 males). Results from the pretest on writing performance indicated that the writing performance of participants of the experimental group 1 and the experimental group 2 was the same in terms of the number of ideas generated ($t=-0.75$; $df=9$; $p=.48$; $M= 6.4$, $SD=3.2$ vs. $M=7.6$, $SD=3.3$); content ($t=-0.74$; $df=16$; $p=.5$; $M= 1.5$, $SD=.7$ vs. $M=1.7$, $SD=0.5$; and the organization of ideas ($t=.0$; $df =18$; $p=1$; $M= 1.8$, $SD=0.8$ vs. $M=1.8$, $SD=0.8$. The pretest on the participants' depicting capability showed that they all capable of using basic lines to present ideas.

3.2. Design

This research was quantitative and qualitative in nature. The cross-intervention research design was employed. Participants trained with either outlining or depicting were instructed to write 8 descriptive paragraphs in total. For the first 4 writing tasks, the experimental group 1 wrote with outlining training and the experimental group 2 wrote with depicting training. For the last 4 writing tasks, the reversed model was applied.

3.3. Instruments

Three instruments were used. To collect quantitative data, tests on writing performance to examine the number of ideas generated, the content and the organization of ideas were implemented. To collect qualitative data, questionnaires on the participants' preference towards and interviews on the participants' viewpoints on the use of outlining and depicting were administered. Students' drafts served as the unobtrusive instrument assisting the assessment of the investigated aspects.

3.4. Writing performance tests

To examine participants' writing performance in terms of number of ideas, content and the organization of ideas, 8 writing tests of 8 different descriptive writing topics were administered. The writing tests' administration was similar in terms of instruction and allotted time. A value of .85 was resulted from a descriptive statistic test indicating a high level of reliability of the writing tests.

To grade the tests in terms of content and the organization of ideas, two components - content and idea organization - in the Composition Profile adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981) was used. This widely-used analytic marking scale is a 4-band scale (1-very poor, 2-fair to poor, 3-good to average, 4-exellent to very good) assessing each component. Whereas content and ideas organization were scored basing on Jacobs' scoring profile, the number of ideas was calculated literally by the raters. An idea refers to a complete thought. Two accredited raters were invited to grade the tests independently. In the grading process, the third and even the fourth rater took part in the grading in case of discrepancies. The correlation coefficients between the two accredited raters indicated a high degree of absolute agreement (.86) between the judges.

3.5. Materials

The writing topics and the teaching plans used in this study were selected and composed by the researcher of this study. Four common test types of descriptive writing subjected for elementary level were selected with reference to the five course books *Interactions 1 Writing*

by Pavlik and Segal (2007), *Mosaic 1* by Pike-Baky and Blass (2008), *Accessing writing* by Weigle (2009), *Great Writing: Great Paragraphs* by Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun and Solomon (2010), *New Cutting Edge* by Sarah, Peter and Jane (2011). The course books have been used by several contemporary English centers and universities. Two specific writing topics for each type of descriptive writing were accordingly composed. The criteria for topic selection are based on the degree of popularity of the topics and their practicality in the targeted learning context. The topics are, to some extent, retrospective as the nature of a large part of descriptive writing. The administered topics include (1) describing people (Uncle Ho, the teacher), (2) describing location (a current language center in the Mekong Delta, Ninh Kieu quay in Can Tho), (3) describing scene (the scene in a video they've just watched, a shopping scene at a supermarket), and (4) describing holidays (Vietnamese Tet holiday, Valentine's Day in Vietnam).

A series of eight teaching plans for an eight-week course to teach the eight selected topics were developed by the researcher of this study. They were composed in light of communicative approach and the integration of the skills. Authentic materials, newspapers, magazines and similar documents, were also used. There were listening, speaking and reading activities before the writing although not all the skills might be applied for one lesson. Importantly, a short guidance on outlining for experimental group 1 and on depicting for experimental group 2 was composed to instruct the participants to make their own outline in words or depicting outline before each writing task. When the teaching plans were finished, they were edited by experienced English teachers in the field. After the edition, they were piloted on 30 students who possessed similar characteristics to the accredited participants. During the course, experimental group 1 was trained to write with outlining or experimental group 2 was trained to write with depicting for each writing topic. For the purposes of the current study, the participants were reminded of the role of the depictive presentation as the container of ideas. Therefore, meticulous care on the appearance of the presentation should not be given, but the participants' ideas for the topics instead.

3.6. Questionnaire

A 26-item questionnaire was developed to explore the participants' preference towards outlining and depicting prewriting strategies in descriptive writings. The items were classified into 4 clusters to respectively examine participants' preference towards the strategies with regards to (1) specific writing topics, (2) effects of the strategies on the number of ideas generated, (3) effects of the strategies on content performance, and (4) effects of the strategies on the organization of ideas. Each item consisted of 4 choices. Choice number 1 was designated for outlining; number 2, depicting; number 3, either of them, meaning that the strategies were equally appreciated to the given case; and number 4, neither of them, meaning that the participants would favor neither of the strategies for the given case. The questionnaires collected information on frequency, and the results were reported in percentage. The measurement values indicated acceptable reliability of the questionnaire (.79).

3.7. Interview

An interview sheet of 7 open-ended questions was developed. The first 6 questions, including three reversed questions, were aimed to gain deep understanding of the participants'

viewpoints on strengths and weaknesses of outlining and depicting. Question 7 collected the participants' recommendations for the improvement of the application of these strategies.

Of the 20 participants, the three who achieved the best and the three who achieved the least in their writing performance were selected for the 6 independently face-to-face interviews. The data gained were recorded, transcribed and translated into English and analyzed using the interview protocol sheet, which reports on the interviewees' similar and different viewpoints as well as their key suggestions for improving the strategies.

3.8. Students' drafts

Students' drafts, on which outlines and depictive presentations dwelled, were observed to identify any evidence supporting the findings on writing performance and the participants' viewpoints towards the application of outlining and depicting.

3.9. Data collection

There were 10 weekly two-and-a-half-hour meetings with all participants in total. In meeting 1, the pretests were implemented and necessary consent was reached. Meeting 2 was for illustration and training on depicting and outlining strategies. From meeting 3 to meeting 10, students wrote on the 8 selected descriptive topics with the teacher's instruction and outlined and depicted topic-related samples before students' writing. In the extra meeting 11, questionnaires were delivered. Two weeks after meeting 11, when all the tests were rated, the interviewer and the selected interviewees had meeting 12 in the 6 individual face-to-face interviews.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Participants' performance in terms of number of ideas generated, content and the organization of ideas

First, descriptive statistic tests were run to calculate the mean score of the number of ideas generated with depicting training and the mean score of the number of ideas generated with outlining training according to four types of descriptive topics (describing people, location, scene, and holiday). Next, an independent sample t-test was conducted on the two mean scores to evaluate whether there was a significant difference in the number of ideas generated between the writings with depicting and the ones with outlining. Then, participants' writings of the two experimental groups were merged to calculate whether there was any significant difference between the effects of outlining and depicting on the number of ideas generated. A paired sample t-test was conducted on the sum of ideas generated in all the writing tests with the depicting training and on the sum of ideas generated in all the writings with the outlining training. The purpose was to evaluate whether participants performed a larger number of ideas with one of the strategies. This procedure was adapted to analyze data from the participants' writing performance in terms of content and the organization of ideas.

For the number of ideas generated, the results indicated that participants generated a significant larger number of ideas with the depicting strategy in comparison with the outlining

strategy *(M= 26.8, SD=5.9* vs. *M=22.9, SD=4.3; t=2.5; df=19; p=.02)* although one strategy proved to be superior to the other depending on types of topics. In this study, with the topics describing location, the number of ideas generated by participants when they applied depicting exceeded the number of ideas generated by participants when they applied outlining *(M= 34.8, SD=6.7* vs. *M=25.5, SD=6.6; t=3.1; df=18; p=.006).*

For content performance, the results concluded that participants whether applying depicting or outlining gained an equal level *(M= 3.5, SD=.7* vs. *M=3.8, SD=.4; t=.5; df=19; p=.6)* although the raw scores showed that participants' performance with outlining training was slightly higher than that with depicting.

The same case happened with the participants' performance of the organization of ideas. Results presented that participants performed equally in their writings in terms of the organization of ideas *(M= 3.4, SD=.6)* vs. *M=3.6, SD=.6; t=-2.1; df=9; p=.04).* The slight superiority in the raw scores of outlining over depicting in helping the participants with the organization of ideas did not result in any statistically significant difference.

4.1.2. Participants' preference towards outlining and depicting

Although participants' preference given to either outlining or depicting varied with regards to the types of descriptive topics, and the effects of these strategies on the number of ideas generated, content and the organization of ideas, overall, the results showed that participants preferred outlining to depicting (with 45% of the participants advocated outlining, and 38%, the depicting). A small number of participants (account for 15.5%) favored both strategies equally, indicating that they could be used whether interchangeably or complementarily. The remaining number of participants accounting for a negligible amount (1.3%) preferred neither of them. One of the explanations for this could be that they did not find it important to apply prewriting strategies when they wrote.

4.1.3. A deeper understanding on participants' viewpoints towards outlining and depicting

There are three major themes emerged from the interviewees' viewpoints towards outlining and depicting strategies discussed in the 6 face-to-face interviews: (1) the strategies' strengths, (2) the strategies' weaknesses, and (3) the interviewees' recommendations for the improvement of the strategies. Merely major points of each were discussed in this paper.

Considering the strengths of each strategy in helping them generate for topic-related ideas, perform content and organize ideas in their descriptive paragraph, most interviewees contended that outlining could help them organize ideas more easily and systematically. This made outlining powerful compared with depicting. Outlining also helped save time, and it was more familiar and applicable to all students. Meanwhile, depicting received positive attitudes from them since it was reported to trigger smooth flows of ideas from the mind, which could consequently create chances for the burst out of a great number of both background and creative ideas. Another powerful point of depicting was that the images dwelled on the draft motivated them to write, and depicting evoked their stronger feelings and awoke more of their senses about the subjects to be described. This could also help them provide a more accurate description on the real subjects.

The content is enough to write, and it saves time because the outline can create good order for the ideas... When the outline is good, it's brief, clear and understood... It presents the ideas systematically… It's easy to apply to everyone since it is more familiar to us.

Ideas would keep coming from the mind when I depicted. The images could, I mean, I could have one more and then one more idea when I looked at it... The images increased creativity and liveliness, so I felt interested to write. Depicting evoked strong feelings and senses about the subjects I needed to describe.

While depicting was appreciated in helping the interviewees generate a large number of ideas and interested them with the depictive presentation, outlining was criticized for limiting the number of ideas generated and boring the writers with words. To outlining, major negative viewpoints towards depicting were that it appeared challenging to the students since it was unfamiliar; there were ideas supposed to be hard to be depicted; therefore, it could not suit all the descriptive writing topics. Moreover, depicting could confuse the organization of ideas than outlining could. Both outlining and depicting were reported to cause the missing of ideas when students were unable to express their ideas by English words or by depicting.

Not many ideas to write. Sometimes I got almost no ideas about some topics. One word to say: Stuck! No image and no visual aids used limited the ideas because students got no picture of the topic in mind. No element to trigger the imagination or thinking. I was stuck.

It can be hard to apply depicting for some topics because some topics contain ideas that cannot be depicted... I got confused organization of ideas in the paragraph because I was confused gazing at the images. I could not decide where to start the paragraph. I knew it… depicting is strange… and it's confusing for those who use it the first time.

However, the interviewees did not always reach a consensus. For instance, there were disagreements on whether outlining or depicting cost more time or whether depicting caused confusion to the organization of ideas.

'It took time to prepare enough the ideas about the topic when I made outlines... Depicting… it cost less time than making outline.'

Suggestions for the improvement of these strategies were given. The suggestions could be put into three sub-categories: suggestions on the application of these strategies, suggestions for jobs to do from the teacher perspectives and from the learner's perspectives.

The interviewees suggested combining the two strategies in many ways. For instance, depicting can be used first to trigger ideas, then outlining to help organize the ideas. To avoid the loss of ideas, depicting can be used in the outlines where students are unable to express their ideas with words, and depicting where students struggle with English words. Also, respondents recommended using outlining and depicting interchangeably.

'When I can not express ideas with words, I can use depicting; and when I can't depict, I should make outlines.'

In addition, interviewees contributed suggestions to teachers. They suggested that teachers should examine the strengths and weaknesses of these two strategies and clarify them to students. Teachers should also try out a large number of different descriptive topics to find out groups of topics that suit best each strategy, each group of students and each individual.

The teacher should examine the features and characteristics of the two strategies, and which topics can best suit each strategy and which can suit both.

Respondents also suggested that students need to help themselves to exploit what strategy will work best for them with a specific topic.

The students should find out which one is more suitable for them considering the topics and to save time.

From the participants' drafts, lots of evidence was also found about the strengths of depicting on helping generating ideas and of outlining on helping the organization of ideas. However, evidence of students' confusion, challenging with depicting and students' poor amount of ideas with outlining.

4.2. Discussion

Depicting proved to be frustrating and challenging to students who lack depicting skill. This has made the most major flaw of this strategy. This weakness of depicting should be admitted, but a solution to this should be found if practitioners would like to put this strategy into practice. Teachers may not need any special training on the application of this strategy apart from a prior practice in using basic lines to present ideas effectively to support students with samples from the outset for their later self-developed manipulation.

The implementation of this strategy is not a big challenge to teachers. However, the key principle may lie on the teacher's job. It is simple but need caution that whether the teacher can make it friendly, fun and comfortable in the classroom. Success in doing would turn depicting to an extremely enjoyable prewriting strategy and a useful tool for brainstorming for a large number of ideas. Otherwise, depicting could probably appear to be frustrating to the students by some teachers.

Respondents in the interviews stated that depicting cannot work well for presenting certain ideas. However, according to a study by Hope (2000) in the art field, drawing is a powerful tool to express their even most abstract ideas that sometimes cannot be expressed by words. Observation on students' drafts in the current study also showed evidence for this when participants depict their emotion and feeling. This use of pictorial presentation can be also found everywhere in daily life and other means like media. Therefore, the major problem does not lie on not being able to depict, but rather the way 'depicters' perceive the main purpose of depicting and their acceptance on the pictorial handiwork from the basis of meaning and information. Only when students could consider and use simple symbols as a means to present ideas like when they use words, would their focus on the meaning remain and would depicting not appear uncomfortable.

Another suggestion may be that depicting can be used with flexibility. For instance, besides using outlining and depicting interchangeably, to help save time and to support students with abstract ideas to be depicted, students can be provided with a general frame on which they can add more detailed pictorial traits to. Or, suggested images, which can help students start their topic, can be given previously. It is also suggested by respondents in the interviews of the current study that the prior coming of oral presentation can enhance the effectiveness of

depicting. Working with their peer to orally describe the topic based on the depictive presentation can be a way. Alber-Morgan (2007) and Gorman & Eastman (2010) encourage EFL students to use colored pencils to express their ideas, convey messages, evoke feelings and accentuate areas of interest. This may suggest that colored pens can be used as aids when depicting to increase the effectiveness of meaning.

Furthermore, the need for visual aids and recalling images of the objects to be described obviously indicates that, in the future, students should be exposed to real experience while they are writing, if possible. This method has been common in the teaching of literature or in the art field. For instance, when an artist or a writer would like to accomplish his best work, he needs to be there right in front of the scene to enable strong feelings and to create a vivid painting. This method is assumed to also work well for EFL writers. For instance, if students were asked to describe a quay, a student who writes at the same time experiencing the scene would be supposed to perform better in comparison with the one who does not. This can be explained that the former can have true emotions and feeling at the same time all his senses are awaken. Depicting has been potential to a broader use and research on depicting can be expanded on a wider range.

"A picture worth a thousand words" (Galbraith et al., 2005) can be taken as a premise for the purposeful use of depicting. Drawing functions as a container of ideas, and drawing help students become more thoughtful when they look at the picture (Hope, 2000). Whether a practitioner determines whether to use, when to use, where to use depicting depends primarily on the specific learners' context and purposes. For instance, when students struggle with brainstorming for ideas, depicting can be an appropriate choice. In other cases, when students are from majors enabling their capability of pictorial presentation, depicting can also be a suitable choice. Otherwise, outlining should be used instead.

The current study endeavors to seek more alternative for prewriting strategies in writing descriptive paragraph to fit a wider variety of students' interests, learning styles and other learner variables (for this purpose, depicting has been discussed over outlining thought out this paper). More importantly, it has been oriented towards the development of descriptive writing. While powerful use of outlining has been confirmed, as for depicting, there have existed certain drawbacks. Depicting has usually faced inevitable challenges in the beginning. Therefore, more effort should be made to refine this new prewriting strategy if teachers plan to put it into practice, using simple symbols to quickly jot down ideas.

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Conclusion

In summary, applying depicting strategy, participants generated a larger number of ideas about the topics to be described. The main reason was due to the use of images that could help a storm of ideas come out. There was no significant difference in level of content development and in level of developing organization of ideas between the group with outlining training and the group with depicting training. Finally, students preferred outlining to depicting though the fact that one strategy proved to be superior to the other depended on types of writing topics and writing contexts. For instance, when participants wished to achieve high level of organization of

ideas, or a systematical outline, they would prefer outlining; however, they would prefer depicting if they wished to brainstorm for more sufficient ideas or overcome communication breakdowns caused by their lack of English vocabulary.

5.2. Implications

Key implications for pedagogical practice were made. First, the features and purposes of depicting should be clarified at the beginning so that students could perceive the role of depicting correctly: to create a container of ideas using very simple sketches. In addition, students should be given training and instruction on depicting at the beginning to avoid their confusion and frustration in their later practice. Importantly, outlining and depicting can be combined in differently flexible ways so that they can primarily help students avoid the loss of ideas and increase their writing performance.

Whist outlining has been a predominant prewriting tool, it is not almighty. Hence, more alternatives should be sought since teaching and learning have been an ongoing process in which educators and learners have always been endeavoring searching for innovation to the development of the pedagogical profession, and when learners are different, complicated and various.

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CHUẨN BỊ Ý TƯỞNG CHO VĂN MIÊU TẢ
VỚI CHIẾN THUẬT LẬP DÀN Ý VÀ PHÁC HỌA Ý TƯỞNG

Tóm tắt: Lập dàn ý là một công cụ chuẩn bị ý tưởng hiệu quả nhằm tăng hiệu quả bài viết. Tuy nhiên, một công cụ khó có thể đáp ứng tốt cho tất cả các loại bài viết. Nghiên cứu này nhằm so sánh hiệu quả của chiến thuật lập dàn ý và chiến thuật mới mang tên phác họa ý tưởng cho bài văn miêu tả. Các tiêu chuẩn so sánh bao gồm số lượng ý tưởng, tính hiệu quả trong bố cục và chất lượng nội dung bài viết. Bài nghiên cứu sử dụng mô hình thực nghiệm chéo lên hai nhóm đối tượng. Dữ liệu chính bao gồm hơn 160 bài viết của 8 chủ đề viết miêu tả, 21 bảng khảo sát và 6 cuộc phỏng vấn chọn lọc. Kết quả cho thấy chiến thuật hiện tại và chiến thuật mới đều có điểm mạnh và yếu. Các đối tượng nghiên cứu cũng bày tỏ quan điểm và sở thích không phải lúc nào cũng đồng nhất về thuận lợi và khó khăn khi sử dụng hai chiến thuật này.

Từ khóa: lập dàn ý, phác họa ý tưởng, văn miêu tả