ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE IMPACT OF VISUAL STIMULI ON THE CONTENT OF WRITING IN TAMIL LANGUAGE: A STUDY AMONG USM UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Visual images are increasingly appearing in learning and teaching resources, delivered across a range of media in a variety of formats: digitally Web-based material and multimedia as well as print and as transparencies. The proliferation of image-rich resources is due to the wide availability of digital images and access to the technology and graphics software that facilitates the creation and delivery of visual materials. The main aim of this research is to investigate the role of visual stimuli in enhancing writing skills among USM undergraduates who are taking Tamil as foreign language. Writing is an important skill often emphasized among foreign language learners. However, most foreign language learners face difficulties to pen down their thoughts. The respondents of this research are pursuing LAT 300 (Tamil Language III) course at the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation and are divide into two groups, experimental and control group. The methods used is written assignment; topic with visual stimuli for experimental group and topic without stimuli for control group. The written assignments were graded using the university's grading rubric. In the questionnaire, the respondents were also asked to give feedback on the use of visual stimuli in writing. The findings of this study revealed that the experimental group performed better as they were given visuals. The experimental group respondents highlighted that they needed stimuli to motivate and trigger their background knowledge on the essay topics. It is hoped that this study will aid language teachers and practitioners to utilize visuals as a support in the teaching of Tamil Language as foreign language.

Keywords: Tamil Language, foreign language, visuals, writing

Introduction

Writing has always been the most troublesome and challenging area of language learning for all students without exception especially if it is to be done in a foreign language (Oqab Jabali, 2018)[1]. Most problems with writing are generating ideas and arranging the content. Students who often face mental- block that is the problem of generating ideas usually give up writing and do not attempt to find solution for their problems.

Many scholars have debated about the best method in addressing the problems in writing but the is no one specific solution that is found to the best. Scholars like Langan (1996)[2], Harmer (2001)[3] and Haynes (2007)[4] suggest methods like free writing and brainstorming to aid students in writing but these methods do not help all students to write especially the weaker ones. To address these problems, researchers like Zurina and Ainun (2004)[5], have done research based on visuals to aid writing among students. Their findings suggest that visuals help students to generate as well as develop the content of the essay creatively.

Therefore, this study aims to find out the effect of visual stimuli among USM undergraduates and how far their writing is improved through the use of visuals in terms of generating ideas and generating content.

Statement of Problem

There are several scholars who have identified writing as a problematic affair among students, especially to those taking Tamil as foreign language. Students often face problems in expressing their ideas and developing these ideas in writing (Broughton et al,1980)[6]. Student often regard writing as 'natural gift' thus hindering them from writing. However, according to Barras (1996)[7], writing is a skill acquired from many drills and practices. To help students generate ideas in a more organized order, Coffin et al (2003)[8] suggest that they are given visuals. Research suggest that using visual treatments in lessons enhances learning with varying degrees of success. Kleinman and Dwyer (1999)[9] examined the effects of specific visual skills in facilitate learning. According to Callaghan & Dobyns (2007;127)[10], 'an image may be used to educate, to support, to share values, opinions, or interest; it may be used to move someone to action, or to move someone to fear, tears, laughter, or awe.' It is believed that a visual does not become a useful stimulus until and unless it is used in a proper manner to instill interest among students regardless of age.

Therefore, in this study, the researcher hopes to find out whether the use of visuals does stimulate students' thinking to produce better written pieces.

Research Questions

This research attempts to answer the following questions:
1. What are the differences in the number of ideas generated using visuals and without visuals?
2. What is the impact of visuals on the style of writing in terms of the organization of supporting ideas?

Review of Literature

Writing in the Foreign Language classroom

Writing has been approached differently by many language educators in different contexts. Graham (2007)[11] states that process writing is a creative act, involving positive and continual feedback, instead of someone only interested in the final product.

Through this process, feedback is essential for the students to understand what is correct and how it can be done better. However, writing is often neglected. For instance, Lopez (2005)[12] states that "Foreign language students are usually not required to write in their L2 outside the classroom. Besides, foreign language teachers are uncertain about the role of writing in the FL classroom." On the other hand, Alodwan and Ibnian (2014)[13] add that the process approach to writing gives students the freedom to try new things with the language, and it helps students develop fluency without worrying about a finished product. Bayat (2014)[14] argues that various techniques should be used to eliminate the burden of writing accurately in a foreign language, and process writing appears to be a beneficial approach.

Among the many studies discussing writing, Polio and Lee (2017)[15] discuss the role of writing in language learning. According to these authors, oral skills production and literacy are related. Writing is an important communication skill and has a significant role in second language acquisition (Chastain, 1988)[16]. Writing has relevance to academic success since it is a widespread assessment measure. Students with weak writing abilities may put their academic success at risk. It is commonly believed that students consider writing as a tedious and challenging task, in which they must engage in order to pass exams.

Visuals in the classroom

Many educators use visuals in the classroom to facilitate learning; on the one hand visuals are great 'strength' for new educators. This is because educators may find difficulties finding appropriate worksheets for learners but through visuals, a whole composition or a story can be narrated. Byrne (1988)[17] stated that, "visual material provides a much more open-ended framework for language practice than texts." It is therefore a steppingstone for students to explore writing topics with visuals.

According to Canning- Wilson (2000)[18], 'pictures help us as individuals to make sense of output and input surrounding us in our daily lives, pictures can bring the outside world into the classroom; thus, making situations more real and in turn helping the learner to use appropriate associated language.' Furthermore, the uses of a visual can be used to create a social setting or to immerse a learner into a new or familiar world that cannot otherwise be created in the classroom environment.

According to Chithravelu, Sithamparam and Teh, (1995)[19], pictures can help students to write, these are students 'who are poor not because they don't have linguistic ability but because they are bored since they find the writing tasks they are given boring.' Some students have prior knowledge of certain essay topics; they need stimulus to 'start off the knowledge. Visuals are a

great way of helping students to trigger their prior knowledge (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 1995)[19].

Visuals and language writing

In the language classroom, the majority of learners face difficulties in writing (Byrne, 1988)[17]. Starting from the introductory paragraph to the conclusion, learners may have problems with the organization of ideas and the elaboration of points. Visuals are a great form of motivation to generate ideas among students, this is supported by Byrne (1988)[17], who says "visual material offers an attractive framework for writing practice, especially if some form of picture sequence is used, and for this reason no doubt the learners generally respond favourably to tasks which are related to some kind of visual context."

Additionally, visual materials that are properly used provide a more 'open-ended' framework for writing activities of different kinds at different levels. Particular kind of visuals, such as diagrams and tables, are valuable for developing organizational skills. Visuals too can make writing activities much more meaningful for the students and thereby increase their motivation to write well. Through this way, students can see not only the reason for writing but also write in a manner appropriate to the communicative goal of the text.

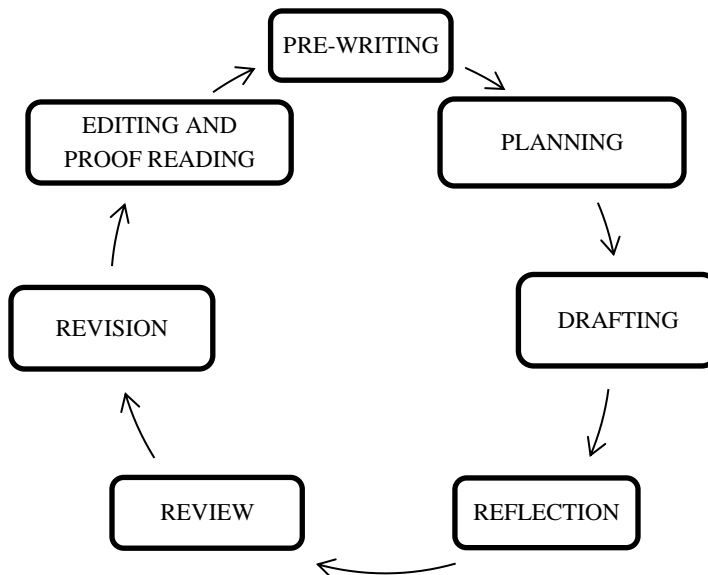## Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 The writing process (adapted from Coffin et al,2003)

Research Methodology

The respondents of this study are 20 undergraduates from the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, USM. These respondents are registered for LAT 300 (Tamil Language Level 3) course and have completed LAT 200, which is a pre-requisite course. This course offered as foreign

language and is taken as an elective/option course to fulfill the language requirements of the university programme.

The instrumentation employed in the study is 3 written assignments; topic with visual stimuli for experimental group and topic without stimuli for control group and a questionnaire consist of two sections, section one is demographic and the second section is a five scale Likert questions on personal opinions. The answers obtained were analyzed and summarized on the theories employed in the study.

Results and Findings

Findings and Discussion of Written Assignments

In general, the findings from the study reveal that the respondents from the experimental group performed better than the control group. The extension of ideas for the essays was coherent and well developed by the experimental group as compared to the control group. Many respondents from the experimental group scored A's while most in the control group scored C's, this is due to the fact that the experimental group generated more logical and relevant ideas compared to the control group. The visuals played an important role in adding the experimental group to write better essay as compared to the control group. The main aim of the study is to see the impact of visuals on the content of the essay; therefore, a large amount of marks will be allocated for the content and grammar will not be an important issue in the marking scheme.

The table below shows the analysis of the overall grades of the respondents in this study. The findings clearly show that the respondents from the experimental group performed better than the control group. This is because the experimental group was given visuals to aid their written task while the control group had to work on their own.

Table 1
Overall Performance of Respondents

TOPIC	T1		T2		T3	
	E	C	E	C	E	C
A	16	4	12	2	14	2
B	4	12	8	10	6	10
C	-	4	-	8	-	8

Analysis of Questionnaires

Experimental Group

Around 80% of the respondents said that writing lessons were often conducted in their class and 20% respondents said that writing was sometimes conducted in their class. 75% of the respondents always enjoyed the writing lessons in their class while 25% sometimes enjoyed the writing lessons. 60% of the respondents strongly agreed that visuals improved their writing and 40% agreed that visuals improved their writing.

Table 2
Responses of students when visuals were used in the classroom

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
Excited	90%	10%	
Motivated	100%		
Interested	100%		
Attentive	90%	10%	
Responsive	100%		
Bored		30%	70%
Irritated		10%	90%
Sleepy		10%	90%
Tired		10%	90%
Restless		10%	90%
Inattentive		10%	90%

Table 2 shows that almost all the students felt motivated, excited and interested when visuals were used in the classroom. None of the feel bored or restless using the visuals for their written assignments.

Table 3
Responses of students on how visuals improved their writing

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
Provided ideas for the topic	100%		
Content for topic is expanded	100%		
Creativity is improved	80%	20%	
Stimulate thinking	70%	30%	
Overall writing	100%		

According to Table 3, most respondents agreed that all the types of visuals can be used to help writing. Almost all respondents agreed that teachers/lecturers should use more visuals in writing lessons/practices to develop students' interest in writing.

Control Group

Around 60% of the respondents said that the writing was often conducted in their class and 40% said the writing lessons were seldom/sometimes conducted in their class. 20% seldom enjoyed the writing lessons and 60% sometimes enjoyed the writing lessons while 20% always enjoyed the writing lessons.

90% said that often visuals improved their writing and 20% said that sometimes visuals improved their writing.

Table 4
Respondent's Feedback on the writing process

	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
Tiring	40%	50%	10%
Stressful	60%	40%	
Boring	20%	50%	30%
Not important		30%	70%
Time consuming	80%	10%	10%

Table above shows that 80% of the respondents strongly agreed that writing is time consuming while 70% said it is important. Only 40% thinks it is tiring while 60% agreed that writing is stressful. These data show that respondents don't have positive attitude towards writing.

Table 5
Problems faced during writing

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
Generating Ideas	90%	10%	
Mental block	80%	20%	
Expanding ideas	90%	10%	
Finding the right choice of words	100%		
No background knowledge	80%	20%	

Table above shows that 90% of the respondents faced problems in generating ideas. This validates the claim made by the researchers that the most problematic affair in writing is generating ideas. In addition, 90% agreed that expanding ideas for writing is another problem when visuals are not given.

Table 6
Responses of students when visuals were used in the classroom

	Strongly Agree /Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree /Disagree
Excited	90%	10%	
Motivated	90%	10%	
Interested	100%		
Attentive	80%	20%	
Responsive	90%	10%	
Bored			100%
Irritated			100%

Sleepy			100%
Tired			100%
Restless			100%
Inattentive			100%

The table above shows that 90% of the respondent agreed that they get excited and motivated to write if they are given visuals. All the respondents agreed that visuals make them to be interested to write. The table shows that the respondents have positive attitude towards writing. Most of the respondents also agreed that all types of visuals can be used to help writing among undergraduates. All the respondents agreed that teachers/lecturers should use more visuals in writing lessons.

In whole, it can be concluded that experimental and control group think that visuals can be a good source of learning aid to improve writing skills. All the respondents shared similar proficiency level, but their essays grades were different based on the one who had visual stimuli and those who did not. Therefore, it can be said that visuals aid students, especially those with low proficiency level to improve in their writing.

Discussion of Research Questions

Summary of Research Question 1:

What are the differences in the number of ideas generated using visuals and without visuals?
Based on the study conducted, it was found that the experimental groups' essays were generally longer compared to the control group because of number of ideas generated for each essay. The ideas generated by experimental group were more compared to the control group. This is due to the visuals that were provided to the experimental group. Although some of the ideas generated by the respondents are not based on the visuals, this proves that the visuals acted as a device to trigger more ideas and their background knowledge. The control group, on the other hand, struggled to generate ideas and their essays were either incomplete or did not have a logical flow. The supporting details provided by the control group were also not very well elaborated compared to the experimental group. Therefore, they were not convincing resulting to poorer grades compared to the experimental group.

Summary of Research Question 2:

What is the impact of visuals on the style of writing in terms of the organization of supporting ideas?
The experimental groups' essays were generally better as compared to the control groups' essays. The experimental group managed to generate more ideas and the supporting ideas were very well organized and elaborated. They also provided many examples to show their understanding of the topic. Their essays were enjoyable to read and show good planning and writing. As for the control group, they were unable to come up with many ideas and did not provide enough supporting ideas to expand the topic. There were almost no examples given by the control group and the essay were generally very short and did not have good flow of ideas.

In sum, the experimental group which was provided with visuals was able to provide well written and organized essays. However, the control group did not show any organization of ideas and did not attempt to complete the essay in proper manner.

Recommendations

This study has proven that 'visual material clearly has great potential an aid to developing writing skills and can provide both contexts and stimulation for a variety of activities' (Byrne, 1988). The study has revealed that visuals not only aid in generating ideas but also trigger background knowledge as well as develop interest and motivation in writing. The respondents who gave negative feedbacks before the study agreed that writing can be enjoyable and exciting activity after the study. They further commented that writing is good activity and can be used to explore creativity. The most shocking difference is that the respondents shared similar proficiency level but the experimental group's essays were well organized and the ideas presented were logical and acceptable compared to the control group. The respondents of experimental group also mentioned in the questionnaire that they enjoyed writing through the aid of visuals and responded well to writing task. The control group on the other hand, did not write well and responded that have written better if they were given visuals. All respondents agreed that visuals helped in aiding writing.

Therefore, through this study it is recommended that teachers of foreign languages, especially Tamil language teachers should incorporate more visuals in the Tamil writing lessons, as it will aid students who are taking Tamil to write better and develop their interest to participate in writing activities. The incorporation of visuals is expected to help students write better as well as help teachers of foreign languages lessen their burden of preparing extra materials for writing classes. The teachers can explore different types of visuals to make writing even more enjoyable. The most important factor is that students need to enjoy writing first before they can attempt to produce good essays. Once the interest is developed, students will automatically have positive attitude towards writing tasks.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the study has provided a platform for future researches to utilize visuals in various contexts.

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