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# Writing Tasks: A Way to Improve Student Performance

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Classroom teachers make decisions, on a daily basis, about the best ways to help students not only learn, but learn how to learn. In addition, they seek to find ways to help students transfer skills not only within a subject area, but across subject areas. In order to assist classroom teachers in these processes, this paper explores what effect a visual, designed to increase students' metacognitive awareness of what is involved in a task, has on their ability to produce a piece of writing that matches the general criteria of a specific writing task and on their ability to express themselves linguistically. Specifically, it examines the task of writing a character sketch.

If a metacognitive awareness of what a task involves is of little significance, there should be no significant difference between writing produced in a task where students are given no specific strategies and in a task where they are given a visual that relates what is required of the task in general to its application in a specific situation, with respect to:

- i: the general organization of the writing.
- ii: the linguistic quality of the writing.

## Literature Review

Several studies (Meyer 1985; Carrell 1985 1990; Carrell et al 1989) in the area of reading have indicated that a heightened awareness of metacognitive factors has a positive impact on students' ability to comprehend textual information. Carrell

(1985, 1990) concluded that making students conscious of text organization increased their ability to recall top level as well as low level rhetorical organization of expository text and increased their ability to express relationships amongst the ideas. Carrell (1989) similarly concluded that direct teaching of text organization enhanced ESL readers' ability to comprehend expository text. Research with native English speakers (Meyer 1985) has also shown that knowledge of the schematic structure of text enhances a reader's ability to comprehend text.

However, what metacognitive awareness a learner needs, or what a learner needs to know about learning, in order to perform a task successfully, is not always so easy to determine. Once task components become automatic, it is easy enough to view the product, what the learner hopes to attain, but not so easy to see the process, the components that make up the whole.

One way to approach analysis of task is to use Mohan's (1986) "Knowledge Framework". The Knowledge Framework suggests that all tasks have two aspects: "general, theoretical knowledge and specific, practical knowledge" (p. 40). In addition, all tasks, or situations, include a set of knowledge structures (KS), as shown in Table 1.

In addition, it suggests that each knowledge structure, such as classification, appears across subject areas, both in and out of school. For example,

Background Knowledge		
Classification	Principles	Evaluation
Description	Sequence	Choice

Action Situation (Adapted from Mohan, 1989, p. 104.)

**Table 1**

classification is as much a part of home economics as it is of physics, and, as students soon realize, not only are they classified into groups, but they also encounter classification in record shops, in sports, and in all other aspects of their lives. Having a knowledge of classification in general, then, can assist a student in learning a new mode of classification since s/he has background knowledge that enables him/her to comprehend this type of relationship.

In addition, knowledge structures can be observed in text, oral or written, and can also be represented visually. The main difference is that text "is defined by its stages or schematic structure" (Mohan 1989, p. 102), while visuals, or semiotic representations of knowledge structures, are "defined on the basis of logicosemantic relations" (p.113). Also, whereas "genres (text structures) account for differences between texts, KS's account for similarities between texts, and between verbal and nonverbal communication" (p. 113).

This is relevant to the present study since the Knowledge Framework is recommended as a way to analyze the general knowledge a task requires as well as a way to develop a visual that links this general knowledge to a specific situation.

### Subjects

The subjects for this research project

were 16 Grade 8 students in a Modified English class in a Canadian secondary school. The students had previously been identified by their elementary schools as students who were likely to encounter difficulty in secondary school because of their level of language proficiency. The group included males (69%) and females (31%), native speakers (25%) and non-native speakers (75%), Canadian-born (81%) and people born outside of Canada (19%). None of the students had attended an ESL class, but a majority of the students (75%) were non-native speakers, and all of the students had attended Learning Assistance Centres at various times in their elementary schools.

### Task Description

A short story, "Ramon", from the prescribed English text, was selected because it was one of the few stories in the text with two equally "main" characters. As such, it provided an opportunity to assign students two writing tasks that were equally challenging. After having read the short story, and after having had a chance to discuss the story as a class, the students were asked to:

- a) write a character sketch of the story teller (one main character in the story)
- b) write a character sketch of Ramon (another main character in the story).

All of the students performed Task A and then Task B. They were given a half an hour to do each task. For Task A they were simply given a half an hour to do the writing. They were told they could use this half hour to get organized for the writing as well as do the writing, but were given no specific instructions as to how to organize themselves. For Task B the half hour was divided as follows: during the first part, the students were reminded of what they had been asked to include in previous character sketches they had written; they were then shown a visual organizer (see Figure 1) that had been used for a previous writing task of the same type; the students were then asked to take a few minutes to make a similar visual of their own about "Ramon" before beginning to do the actual writing. For both writing tasks the students were permitted to refer to the story in their book and to use materials from class discussion.

It is interesting to note that in Task A none of the students chose to spend time organizing their writing and not one of the students was able to actually complete the writing. Several students started writing, abandoned their attempts, started again, looked through their text, and generally fumbled around, using the time quite unproductively. The atmosphere in the class was one of discomfort, with questions about what they should write, what they should include, whether or not they needed an introduction, et cetera.

During Task B, the students had less time to actually write, because time had been taken up with drawing their attention to what a writing of this type should include, and because the students took time to organize information from the story in their visual. In spite of this, each of the 16 students was able to complete the task.

ORGANIZATION SHEET FOR CHARACTER SKETCH

Introduction:

Title:

Plot:

Place:

Time:

Main Character:

Body:

What the character is like:

How the author lets us know:

Reasons why the character is like this:

In the beginning		
In the middle		
At the end		

Conclusion:

Is the Character believable? \_\_\_\_\_ Why/Why Not? \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 1

## BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

CLASSIFICATION	PRINCIPLES	EVALUATION
parts of a character sketch	purpose of each part	how a writing is evaluated
components of each part	how the parts are put together	how well their writing matches the criteria
placing bits of information in each part	how to show sequence of events how to show cause/effect relationships	selecting parts of story to use
DESCRIPTION	SEQUENCE	CHOICE

## SPECIFIC SITUATION

Table 2

**Task Analysis**

Table 2 (above) gives an analysis of the task based on the Knowledge Framework (Mohan, 1986). As the breakdown shows, successful performance of this task requires that students draw on their general, or background, knowledge of writing a character sketch and apply this to a specific situation. Making this type of connection, though it seems an obvious one to make, does not come naturally for all students. As Tripp (1989) says, "skills and generalizations need to be very precisely and directly taught" (p. 6) if students are to make connections between what they know and what they do.

The students that acted as subjects in this research have worked with this model for several months, but, as the results show, are still not at the stage of automatically connecting what they know with what they do in a specific situation,

although improvements have been noted in this area over the past few months. Schmidt (1990) comments on the importance of aspects of a task becoming automatic when he says that if a task requires controlled processing it "cannot be carried out concurrently with other demanding tasks". In other words, until several actions required of a given task are at the automatic level, all aspects of a task are apt to suffer.

**Evaluating the Writing**

Each of the writings was typed and coded so that it would not be possible to know which writings belonged to which students. These were then given to two teachers to mark, using a ten-point scale. Each paper was given a separate mark for 'General Criteria' and 'Linguistic Criteria.' If there was more than a two-point difference in the mark given by the two teachers, the paper was given to a third marker. As it turned out, none of the

papers required a third opinion. Prior to marking the students' work, each marker was given training in the use of the evaluation system.

### Results

Table 3 gives the mean scores for both the General Criteria and the Linguistic Criteria for each task:

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	Task A	Task B
General Criteria	3.125	5.969
Linguistic Criteria	3.625	5.281

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**Table 3**

A paired samples *t*-test on Task A and Task B comparing the General Criteria, shows a significant difference ( $t = 9.02$ ,  $DF = 15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, a paired samples *t*-test on Task A and Task B comparing the means on the Linguistic Criteria, shows a significant difference ( $t = 4.8$ ,  $DF = 15$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

These results suggest that a heightened awareness of the metacognitive aspects of a task have a significant influence on students' ability to generally organize their work as well as on their linguistic performance.

A further interesting result is the correlation between General scores and Linguistics scores. A Pearson Correlation Matrix showed a correlation of .857 on the General Criteria and Linguistic Criteria marks on Task A and a correlation of .855 on the General Criteria and Linguistic Criteria marks on Task B. This indicates that there is a strong correlation between metacognitive awareness of what a task involves and linguistic performance on the task. It also suggests that when students are

consciously controlling several aspects of a task, their ability to achieve general organizational objectives of the task and their ability to perform at their optimum linguistic level are both affected.

### Discussion

In spite of the fact that this study has limitations in terms of practice effect, the number of subjects involved, the lack of variety of subjects with regard to academic achievement and language proficiency, and that an intact class was used rather than a class formed by random selection, as a pilot study it provides some interesting data.

The impact that a graphic organizer had on the students' ability to perform this writing task, linguistically as well as in general organizational terms, suggests that further investigation is warranted. It would be interesting, for example, to determine what impact the use of a visual would have on the writing performance of students who are already considered to be 'successful' writers. The present results indicate that heightening students' metacognitive awareness of what a task involves has significant impact on their linguistic and organizational skills. It is possible that successful, native speaker writers would also benefit from this form of awareness. Having a better understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it might help these students to become more proficient writers as well.

In addition, it would be worth investigating the effects that a visual organizer, designed to illustrate the general objectives of a task and how the general objectives relate to a specific situation,

would have on other types of writing tasks. The task of writing a character sketch may, in its deep structure, be similar to other types of writing tasks, yet manifest a surface structure that is quite different. Providing students with visual organizers to illustrate these similarities and differences might enable all students to become more proficient and more flexible writers.

### Conclusion

The primary advantage of this model is that it offers a way of linking language and content. Rather than focusing on language and then on content, language and content are co-taught. Students are therefore able to progress academically as well as linguistically.

Consequently, teachers who work in an academic setting with students who have limited proficiency in the language of instruction may well benefit from using a task-based model of instruction that emphasizes the importance of background knowledge and graphically illustrates how this knowledge relates to a specific task.

Students also benefit by becoming more proficient at recognizing generalities and by becoming more proficient at applying these generalities to new situations. As a result, they have a better chance of not only learning specific content in a subject and the language used to express this content, but also a better chance of developing a way of learning how to learn.

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### About the Author

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