The Effects of Time Constraints on the Unity and Coherence of IELTS Candidates’ Writing Skills

Mohammad Zare, Sanaz Mohazabieh, Zahra Kamali
Department of Language Teaching, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

Corresponding email address
Mohammad_mz46@yahoo.com

Article reference:

Abstract: This study investigates the effects of time constraints on writing ability of IELTS candidates in terms of two writing features of unity and coherence. To do this, a total number of 30 Iranian EFL learners attending IELTS preparation classes were chosen from both genders of male and female. Two standard IELTS writing task 2 topics were selected by the researchers for both pre and post-tests. The candidates were categorized into two groups of control and experimental. The control one took the post-test under ordinary conditions, without limitation, allocating 40 minutes of time whereas the experimental group, were asked to achieve a task 2 essay under timed condition of 30 minutes. Both pre and post-test writings were corrected by three IELTS writing assessors in order to increase the validity of scoring and decrease the subjectivity of the issue. With regard to first research question addressing the difference in writing performance of both genders under time stress, the findings indicated they both performed the same and less time allocation affected both genders’ performance to the same extent. The second research question that investigated the general effect of time stress on coherence and unity of the writings revealed the application of an increasing number of irrelevant sentences and reducing the unity of the writing task. However, the number of appropriate transitions that increase the coherence of the task was observed to be more in post-test which is due to the treatment during the course. Moreover, during a one to one interview, most students objected to the time limitation and its effect on their anxiety which made them seek resort to apply more irrelevant sentences. In the end of the study, it was concluded that time constraints affect the unity of the writing task, but not the coherence.

Index Terms: Coherence, Time Constraints, Transitions, Unit.

1. INTRODUCTION

The capability to write effectively and fluently in English is becoming increasingly important in today’s modern world, since communication through language has become more and more essential. Writing is known as an important skill for multifarious reasons in education and business. In fact, it plays a significant role in personal and professional life and the pedagogical purposes of writing range from improving, training, and practicing language in the early stages of learning to communicating fluently and accurately at intermediate and more advanced levels (Raimes, 1987).

Although “little is known about the effects of time restriction on writing performance of students” (Caudery, 1990:123), many international examinations in English continue to include essays that have to be written under severe time
constraints. In fact, essays written under timed conditions become a key criterion for establishing the level of proficiency of the students’ written language. And this practice is gaining currency. The essay tests in the American Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination, the Test of Written English (TWE), and IELTS are examples of essay writings which work against the process trend.

Undoubtedly, writing is a complicated process through which ideas are created and expressed. Writing is a difficult skill to acquire as it involves more than just putting correct grammatical forms together. While second language learners in schools are learning the complex skills involved in writing there is a need to know how foreign language writers in Iran write and learn to write under time stress. Nowadays, more and more educators as well as leaders in all areas of society have realized that writing to meet the deadline is central to success in and out of school. Apart from many factors involved in writing skills, the present study was to investigate the effects of time stress on two prominent features of writing (unity and coherence) of ESL learners. The researcher proposed the following research questions to be answered.

1. Does time stress have the same effects on the performance of both female and male ESL written skills and to what extent?
2. To what extent do time constraints affect the unity and coherence of EFL learners’ writing skills?
3. What are the students’ opinions about and reactions toward the effects of time stress on two major writing features of coherence and transition?

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Background

2.1.1 The teaching of writing skills

There is no doubt that teaching second language learners of English to acquire writing skills is by no means easy. Caudery (1990, p. 122) states “that the teaching of writing skills encompasses more than general training in the production of correct grammatical sentences or in the use of cohesive devices,” it consists of the formulation and manipulation of ideas and concepts, and putting them in the most appropriate language. As Kroll (1990, p. 140) points out, it is essential for ESL students to “create written products that manifest mastery over contextually appropriate formats in order to present ideas rhetorically as well as mastery in all language areas.

Collins and Gentner (1980, p. 67) refer to this notion as: much of the difficulty of writing originates from a majority constraint that must be satisfied simultaneously.

More specifically and underlying all these is the time allocated, a dispensable factor in the learning and teaching of the writing process. According to Raimes (1983), a writer is in need of time to decide, to toy with ideas. Writing and rewriting sentences need time so as to emerge new lines of thoughts and arguments. In order to try out new words and make changes writers also need time. Everything is in a state of flux, and time must not be an element restricting revision, which is part and parcel of the writing process. Therefore, for any curriculum planning, sufficient time should be provided to allow students the freedom to explore and take risks in order to develop as writers. Having enough time for such activities, learners will likely be able to produce an interestingly organized and accurate piece of writing. This is because given time student writing has the chance to move from inchoate and vaguely defined thinking to more organized, coherent, and polished presentation of ideas and subject matter.

The need for more time for teaching such lengthy writing techniques is approved by Zamel (1983, p. 174). Teaching these drawn-out techniques puts EFL/ESL teachers into trouble since the curriculum allocates limited time to teach writing skill. For example in educational system of Malaysia, an English teacher has totally 200 minutes per week to teach English language as a subject including writing skill which is considered as a short time. Given the above, reaching high level of competence among students seems far-fetched for they have limited opportunity of immersion in the target language.
According to Penaflorida (1998), although English learners start to learn this language from the very first year of school, most of them fail to gain an adequate competence in English due to time constraints. Furthermore, another shortcoming of educational systems which adds to inadequacy of allocated time to practice writing is obsolete teaching methods as well as fossil beliefs held by ESL teachers. For instance, asking students to do an exercise which needs imitation of a model essay is an activity which restrains creativity. Another practice which puts more emphasis on form rather than substance is having students correct all errors possibly found in an essay. Still another treatment given by teachers is to treat students' writings as a product, rather than as a step taken in the process of improvement. These practices all impede development in students and puzzle them. As a result, real communication does not take place; since the students are devoid of the ability to express their ideas clearly as they write.

Grammatical accuracy is emphasized in many programs which in fact limits students' freedom in expressing their thoughts and impedes their development as successful writers. Accordingly, the validity of an essay as a test which evaluates a candidate's writing ability is debatable unless there is a link between writing performance under normal condition and time constraint. There are still many international examinations which consist of essays that must be written under extreme time limitations although “little is known about the effects of time restriction on writing performance of students” (Caudery, 1990, p. 123). These essays are getting to be as a yardstick for denoting the proficiency level of students' writing ability. To name a few examples of product-oriented essay exams one can cite the American Test of English as a Foreign Language) TOEFL) examination, the Test of Written English (TWE) and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in Malaysia.

2.2 Related Studies

Some studies have already scrutinized the prewriting drafts of essays written under time constraints. A good example of this is a piece of research conducted by Chiste and O'Shea (1990). Giving writing competence tests, they analyzed features of prewriting activities of some unaccomplished writers studying at the Alberta Universities. They concluded that the pre-writing activities adopted by those writers were inefficient and curbed. These activities were found to be a hindrance in generating and expressing their thoughts. Accordingly, their lack of sufficient competence in writing were observed in the global aspects of writing; namely, content, structure, and paragraphing, more than other aspects such as correctness and convention. Both researchers found no correlation between grades students got for content, structure, and paragraphing and their prewriting drafts. Moreover, those using strategies for generating ideas got negative correlations with structure that reveals inefficiency of this specific assessment category.

In case of writing under different time conditions, a few studies have been done to evaluate writing performance under different time allocations to evaluate writing performance. In some studies, the results indicate that more time allotment ends up in higher scores. However, in the study conducted by Caudery (1990) and Kroll (1990), small or non-significant effects on writing efficiency were investigated even when there were huge differences in time allotments. The researchers let students write essays in class and complete them while they are home given several days or weeks.

Ruth and Murphy (1988, p. 153) insist on this critical issue and call for further research to investigate the effects of time, specifically time restriction, on writing performance in testing situations. Without such specific localized studies, teachers are indeed in need of the information on how to go about teaching essay writing skills effectively for examinations. When subject to time constraints, teachers are not certain about what aspects of ESL writing need focusing. Some capitalize on methods related to their own personal experiences and their ideas of what teaching of writing should be. Others make decisions in terms of what methods to use depending on what a textbook author says, rather than upon concrete diagnosed needs of the student population. Writing essays for examinations is timed writing for assessment measures, which merely concentrates on writing production. This contradicts the natural process of writing.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study explores the effects of time constraints on Iranian foreign language Learners’ writing ability. More specifically, it aims to investigate whether time limit at the time of writing performance affects learners’ related sen-
tences to the main ideas and consequently their essential links of thought resulting in coherence. In this section four parts will be depicted which are carried out under researchers’ investigations. To start with participants, their personal characteristics are discussed, and then information about procedures, design, and data analysis are considered respectively and separately.

3.1 Participants

Participants of this study were 30 male and female Iranian IELTS candidates, being prepared for IELTS examination, in Niayesh English language Institute of Shiraz. All of the participants were Persian native speakers. Their age ranged from 18 to 40 and they were chosen from advanced learners, who are much more familiar with writing skills. They were categorized in two control and experimental groups. The control group was not limited to time at the time of writing performance (post-test) and learners were given actual time for their writing essays. The experimental group was limited in time in order to investigate the effect of time stress on their writing skills. At the end, 10 interviewees were randomly selected to discuss their views about the effects of time constraints on their performance. In addition, three experienced language teachers who were informed to the procedure of the study by the researcher were the participants in this study to help the researcher in correcting and scoring the papers of the students.

3.2 Instruments

Two standard IELTS writing task 2 topics for both pre and post-tests were applied among homogenized and categorized Iranian advanced IELTS candidates to investigate two fundamental interrelated features of advanced writing skills (unity and coherence) so as to answer the first and the second research questions. Also, after the post-test some randomly chosen candidates were interviewed through a questionnaire to have an in depth understanding of which features of their writing ability is mostly affected by time limit.

3.3 Procedure

First, at the beginning of the semester, participants in both groups were given one pre-test (first IELTS writing task 2 topic) so that both their general writing ability and their level of writing proficiency were tested. The pre-test was used to see whether all IELTS candidates in both groups are homogenous in terms of their knowledge of writing skills.

After pretests, during the semester, learners in experimental and control groups were given the same writing instructions, especially different choices of writing sentence structures so as to follow the same techniques to reach both unity and coherence features of writing skills. The researchers observed both classes so that they can make sure that all candidates in both groups receive the same general and specific writing instructions especially the same instructions for the ability to apply a variety supporting sentences and transitions. The researchers also controlled that the instructor during the term examines the participants writing performance several times in order to investigate whether learners are getting familiar with and applying what they have been taught. The amount of time that learners were given during the semester to write several essays in both groups was the standard time of writing IELTS task 2 (40 minutes).

After the treatment, at the end of the term, participants in both groups were given a post-test (second IELTS writing task 2 topic) so as to check their writing ability. Participants in the control group had the standard amount of IELTS time (40 minutes), whereas the learners in the experimental group were given only 30 minutes to measure the ultimate writing skills. Immediately after the post-test, some randomly chosen participants were interviewed by the researchers so that the researchers had a better understanding of the effects of time constraints on learners’ strategies towards performing the task especially their reactions towards applying relevant sentences and transitions to keep the writing coherent.

The selection of the participants in this study was non-random, but the assignment of the participants to the experimental and control groups in addition to selection of the interviewees was random, therefore the design is a quasi-experimental one. Having pre and posttest also confirmed the quasi-experimental nature of the present research. As Bechofer and Paterson (2012, p. 24), present “the most valid of these quasi-experiments is where the treatment group and the control group are both measured before and after the experiment”. That is, for each group, there is both a pre-test and a
post-test.

Thirty learners were randomly selected from a majority of IELTS candidates and categorized into two groups: one control group receiving both general and special writing training instructions during the term, and the standard IELTS writing time for post-test (40 minutes), and experimental group standardly instructed as the control group, but intentionally limited to time (30 minutes) in their posttest writing performance.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the assessment of writing skill is subjective and subjectivity of writing ability has been always the matter of the validity of scoring, the researchers took advantage of three experienced IELTS writing assessors to assess the participants’ essays to lessen the degree of subjectivity issue in writing assessment. The assessors were asked not only to score candidates’ writing essays, but purposefully also to indicate irrelevant sentences affecting unity and intersentential ties that participants have applied in their essays to keep their writing papers coherent. Having assessed the IELTS candidates’ writing papers, the researchers compared both control and experimental groups’ writing performance to answer research questions.

For the first research question, the comparison was based on both male and female’s writing performance and the frequency of irrelevant sentences and essential links of thought affecting unity and coherence respectively. For the second question, IELTS candidates’ writing performance in terms of both overall writing ability and the frequency of irrelevant sentences and transitions affecting unity and coherence was analytically compared. With regard to the third research question, 10 students were randomly chosen from among the whole. They were asked on the basis of a one to one interview about the extent to which they find time limit effective or destructive on the quality of writing and on what specific aspects of unity or coherence it is more found.

Table 4.1
The Frequency and Percentage of the Number of Irrelevant Sentences and Appropriate Transitions Committed by Men in Pre-And Post-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing features (unity and coherence)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant sentences</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate transitions</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2
The Frequency and Percentage of the Number of Irrelevant Sentences and Appropriate Transitions Committed by Women in Pre-And Post-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing features (unity and coherence)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant sentences</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate transitions</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first research question aimed to investigate the effect of time stress on the performance of both female and
male ESL written skills. Among several writing features, two main ones; unity and coherence were explored in this study. In order to investigate the effects, the descriptive statistics of each category was calculated. The language areas, frequencies of students’ mistakes committed in pre-and post-tests are presented in tables 1 and 2.

As Tables (1,2) indicate, with regard to both genders, the number of irrelevant sentences affecting unity and coherence increased from pre-test to post-test. Regarding unity, both tried to apply more irrelevant sentences under time limit, that is, men had 24.6% of irrelevant sentences (28 mistakes) in pre-test and 42.6% (90 mistakes) in post-test. Women also made 28.9% (33 mistakes) and 41.6% (92 mistakes) in pre-and post-tests respectively. Both genders also applied more appropriate transitions in from pre-test to post-test. Under the pressure of time constraints, men applied 75.4% (86 transitions) and 57.4% (121 transitions) in both pre-test and post-test respectively. Women tried to increase the frequency of transitions from 71.1% (78 transitions) to 58.4% (129 mistakes) between both pre-test and post-test.

Table 4.3
The Frequency and Percentage of the Number of Irrelevant Sentences and Appropriate Transitions Committed In Pre-And Post-Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing features (unity and coherence)</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant sentences</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate transitions</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second research question explored the effect of time limit on the unity and coherence of EFL learners’ writing skills. For this, the descriptive statistics of both irrelevant sentences affecting unity and transitions affecting coherence (learners’ essential links of thought) are calculated. The language areas, frequencies of students’ mistakes committed in pre-and post-tests are indicated in tables 3.

According to table (3), all IELTS candidates in their writing papers applied more irrelevant sentences while exposed to time limit. The number of irrelevant sentences increased from 37.6% (61 mistakes) to 40.7% (172 mistakes) between pre-test and post-test. Also, learners tried to use more transitions affecting coherence from 62.4% (162 appropriate transitions) to 59.3% (250 transitions) in pre-test and post-test respectively.

The third research question attempted to draw the students’ opinions about and reaction toward the effects of time stress on two major writing features. All students, who were interviewed, mentioned following opinions regarding the effects of time constraints on their writing papers.

1. Since my mind was so busy finishing the task containing 250 words, I guess I was not that successful as I had been in previous tasks having 40 minutes.
2. Due to I am somehow weak at writing compared to other skills, being limited to time was so stressful and I couldn’t concentrate specially when I reminded myself of the rest.
3. I was to some extent under the pressure of time, since I couldn't appropriately structure the body of the task especially the end of the body part due to I still had to conclude the task in short time.
4. I think I have written some parts not totally aware of what exactly I performed.
5. Since I had not already experienced such a condition, I just focused to finish the task particularly at the exact word count due to I did not want to lose points for not having 250 words. I think I was not that able to have more sophisticated structures as I had applied in my writing before.
5. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, the current study aimed at investigating the effects of time stress on writing ability of IELTS candidates with regard to writing features: unity and coherence. Since the participants of this study received a great deal of instruction in process of research, they enjoyed a process and product approach in writing. However, IELTS writing task is a product-oriented one by nature. Within a two-month period of treatment, their ability in writing IELTS task 2 essays was a purpose of treatment. It can be concluded that as IELTS candidates are limited to time while doing writing tasks, especially task 2, they are more likely to take advantage of more irrelevant sentences, putting unity in jeopardy, in order to compensate appropriate IELTS standard word count. In other words, since the minimum standard number of words written in IELTS writing task 2 must be 250, candidates capitalize on more sentences which lead to utilizing more irrelevant sentences influencing unity. On the other hand, this is not true for the use of transitional signals affecting coherence in writing ability as candidates had natural range of appropriate transitions in both pre and posttests. That is to say, time constraints have no negative effects on IELTS candidates’ choice and usage of transitions.

As the results show, with regard to the first research question which focused on writing performance of the two genders under time constraints, one can conclude that the participants in both genders in control and experimental groups did the same in both pre and post-tests. A great increase in the application of more irrelevant sentences as they were pressed for time was observed in both groups. Since it was an IELTS task 2 essay, which must contain at least 250 words, both genders applied a great deal of irrelevant sentences to tackle the task in case of word limit. On the other hand, regarding transitions affecting the coherence of the writing, both genders performed approximately the same in using an increasing number of appropriate transitions in the given post-test. This improvement can be attributed to the effectiveness of instruction during the semester.

In case of the second research question addressing the effect of time stress on general writing success, the findings obtained in this study in general support the idea of negative effect of time on the writing feature of unity, that is, the less time is allocated to 250-word task 2 essay, the more risk is observed for the candidates to apply irrelevant sentences to fulfill the task; hence, reducing the unity. However, no specific effect was investigated for time limit and using appropriate transitions; one can say, coherence. According to the results taken from the post-test, the participants made more use of appropriate transitions while achieving the task due to effective instruction and process-oriented approach to writing which was conducted through the research. With regard to unity, the finding of this study is contradictory with Caudery (1990) and Kroll (1990) study in which small or non-significant effect of time on writing efficiency were investigated.

Finally, as a one to one interview with some of the participant candidates indicate, their responses mostly reveal that achieving task 2 essay during 30 minutes, rather than 40, imposes great stress on them and that may be why they seek resort impertinent sentences in order to fulfill the task and achieve the required word count, instead of the total comprehensiveness and meaningfulness.

REFERENCES


Authors Bio

Mohammad Zare is a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Islamic Azad University of Shiraz, Iran. He has been teaching English language for about 15 years. His areas of interest are applied linguistics, IELTS, TOEFL, writing skill, discourse, learning strategies and language teaching.

Sanaz Mohazabieh is a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Islamic Azad University of Shiraz, Iran. She has been teaching English language for about 7 years. Her areas of interest are applied linguistics, discourse analysis, materials development, social semiotics, IELTS, TOEFL and language teaching.

Zahra Kamali is a Ph.D. candidate in TEFL at Islamic Azad University of Shiraz, Iran. She has been teaching English language for about 7 years. Her areas of interest are applied linguistics, discourse analysis, IELTS, TOEFL and language teaching and testing.