

Semantically Enhanced Composition Writing With Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL)

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Abstract

*Using an experimental design and an interview guide for teachers, the study sought to establish the effectiveness of using semantic mapping in enhancing composition writing with learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). A class of 44 ESL Form Three students participated in the study. First the researcher gave a composition (**Composition A**) to the 44 students without giving the students any pre-writing activity. The class was randomly divided into two groups of 22 students each. One group was given **Composition B** without any pre-writing activity. The second group was taught the skill of semantic mapping as a prewriting activity for **Composition B**. Students were only identified with numbers. The class was not known to the researcher. Compositions were marked and recorded separately for the two groups. A comparison of performance was made for results in **Composition A** and **Composition B** to see if using semantic mapping had any impact on performance in composition writing. The study revealed that students who have been exposed to semantic mapping tend to write better compositions than those who have no knowledge of semantic mapping. The study also established that semantic mapping can be used to generate information before a composition is written. It was also observed that after information had been generated, students who had any information gaps had the teacher, the groups or the class to come to their aid in making clarifications. Semantic mapping was also found to be a student centred approach that created more opportunities for students to create their own knowledge than the teacher centred approaches. Semantic mapping was found to encourage cooperative learning. Pupils are more placed to benefit from their learning if they assist each other in doing so.*

1.0 Introduction

Language teaching involves the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The learning and teaching of these skills puts different demands on both the teacher and students. On the part of the teacher, Kravas -Ducas (1995) indicates that the teacher is the source of expertise, plays management roles, facilitates learning, plays a caring role and evaluates learning. The teacher designs the lesson plan that sets aims and sequences of activities designed by the teacher as a means of fulfilling his or her responsibilities (Hedge, 2004:34). The learner, on the other hand, has the role of processing the linguistic input in the process of acquiring linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence strategic competence and fluency as listed by Hedge (2004;56). Of the four language skills mentioned above, writing puts more linguistic demands on both the teacher and the ESL students.

In view of the complex nature of ESL instruction, especially composition writing, keen interest developed in the teaching and learning of this skill. In talking to English Language teachers at the school purposively chosen for the study, the view was that composition writing seemed to be treated with very little enthusiasm by learners. The observation also made was that pupils were performing below expectation in English Language at 'O' Level. The record of marks was worrisome in that pupils were performing poorly without any signs of improvement. Both free and guided compositions needed attention. Discussions were held with the teachers concerned on issues of methodology in the teaching of composition writing. The teachers indicated that the learners did not put much preparation in writing their compositions. Students did not approach writing from a process view.

Hedge (2004:302) explains that 'the process view of writing sees it as thinking, as discovery'. He goes on to explain that the process view involves a number of activities such as setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it, then editing. It is a complete process which is neither easy nor spontaneous for many learners of English as a second language (Hedge, 2000:302). The same view is shared by Shaughnessy (1977:222) who states that 'One of the most important facts about the composition process that seems to get hidden from students is that the process that creates precision is itself 'messy'. The concept of semantic mapping intrigued the researcher as a possibility of a 'messy' approach that would 'create precision' in students' compositions. It is against this background that the researcher went on to study the effectiveness of using semantic mapping in improving composition writing skills of ESL learners.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

ESL Students who have problems in composition writing do not perform well in examinations at 'O' Level. Teachers who do not engage ESL learners in meaningful and engaging activities only continuously test learners' writing skills instead of improving them.

1.3 Research Question

Does semantic mapping help in improving learners' composition writing skills?

1.4 Sub-Research Questions

1. How generative is semantic mapping?
2. How useful is semantic mapping as an information gap activity?
3. How far is semantic mapping a student centred approach?
4. How far is semantic mapping a cooperative activity?

1.5 Theoretical framework

1.5.1 Constructivism

Informed by constructivism, current practice in teaching expects that, since it is the learner who is supposed to benefit from the learning experience, the learner should be involved more than the teacher. Active learners benefit more than passive learners who are seen as tabula rasa or empty slates to be filled in by the teacher or the teacher applying what has been known as the jug and mug kind of principle.

1.5.2 Semantic mapping

Semantic mapping is a technique developed by Johnson and Pearson (1978). Concept maps are graphical representations of knowledge. They allow us to understand the relationship between ideas by creating a visual map of the connections. They are composed of concepts, enclosed in circles or boxes, and connecting lines indicating the relationships between concepts or propositions (Cañas, 2003)

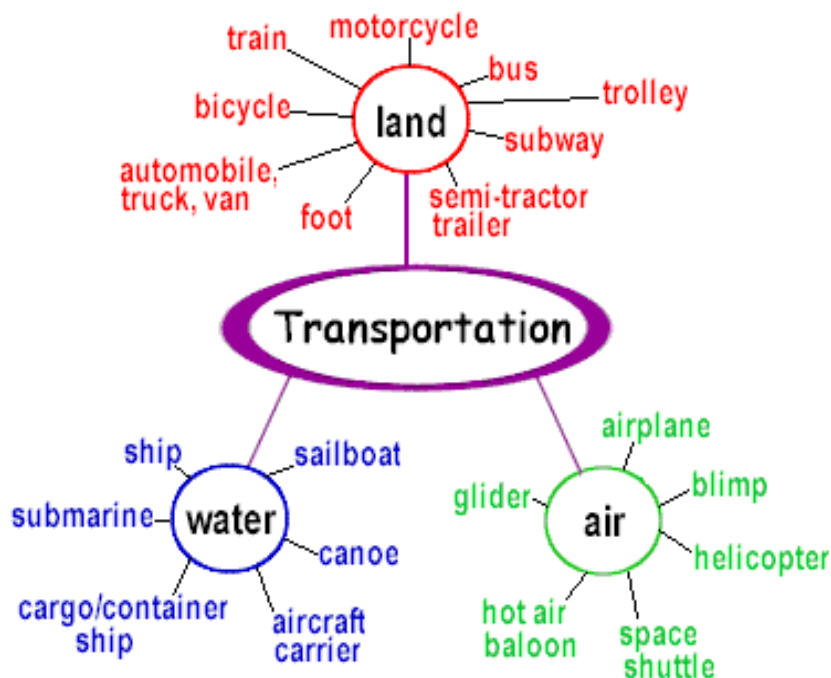
Melton (2004) explains that a semantic word map allows students to conceptually explore their knowledge of a new word by mapping it with other related words or phrases similar in meaning to the new word.

For Pearson and Johnson, semantic mapping is a strategy for graphically representing concepts. Semantic maps portray the schematic relations that compose a concept. It assumes that there are multiple relations between a concept and the knowledge that is associated with the concept. They go on to explain that for any concept there are at least three types of associations:

1. associations of class-- the order of things the concept falls into;
2. associations of property-- the attributes that define the concept; and
3. associations of example-- exemplars of the concept.

Pearson and Johnson offer the example of the concept of "federal." It is observed that federal is in the class of "forms of government." It is one of many such forms, including monarchy, patriarchy, plutocracy, *inter alia*. The properties of federal include a) the uniting common interests of various political units like sovereign states and b) the division of power among subunits like the legislative, judicial, and executive units of a government.

A semantic map can also be explained as a graphic arrangement of words and it shows how new words and ideas are related to each other within a text. It is also an effective diagnostic tool where the teacher can find out students strengths in observing relationships in words. The diagram below from <http://www.kidbibs.com/> accessed on 29 August 2012 exemplifies a semantic map of the word transport. Note the observed relationships that the word 'transport' gives birth to.



Masters, Mori, & Mori (1993) define semantic mapping technique as being "used to motivate and involve students in the thinking, reading, and writing aspects. It enhances vocabulary development by helping students to link new information with previous experience." The above definitions will be adopted as a working framework in the context of this research.

1.6 Literature review

In a study conducted by Kathleen (1993), there was the observation that elementary students have difficulty writing descriptive paragraphs. This was the result of overlooking important details that could have helped in paragraphs that are more communicative. The elementary students were struggling to put thoughts on paper by omitting adjectives. In the study, Kathleen (1993) made the finding that the use of semantic mapping with a well labeled toy helps young students learn to write. Kathleen's study also confirmed the observations made by Johnson, Peterman and Heimlich (1986) that semantic mapping, which they refer to as graphic form, promotes categorical structuring of information by displaying known and new words under labeled categories or conceptual subtopics. Kathleen (1993) concluded in her study that combining semantic mapping of a toy with writing a descriptive paragraph improved the students' abilities. The researcher for this study was not working with elementary students but ESL high school students who were at different levels of transitional bilingualism. Toys would not be appealing to adolescent students who are on a bilingual transition. This research will differ from that no toys will be used and more mature students who are learners of English as a second language will be the subjects for this research to find out how generative semantic mapping is. Hedge (2000) also addressed the issue of how students could be helped to generate ideas. She begins by noting that one of the hardest tasks in writing is getting started. She notes that this could be solved by training the students in the skill of brainstorming. This research will try to establish if brainstorming is compatible with the idea of semantic mapping.

Masters Mori and Mori (1993), though agreeing with the observations made by Kathleen (1993) that semantic mapping helps to link known words and new words go on to look at linking known information about a topic or concept with new information.

New information is linked to previous experiences and this enhances new vocabulary. They go on to advise that the class should be lead into a discussion that focuses on identifying meanings and uses of words, clarifying ideas, highlighting major conclusions, identifying key elements, expanding ideas and summarising information. The purpose of this study is to establish how far learners of English as a second language in the Zimbabwe context could benefit from semantic mapping as an information gap activity.

Hedge (2000) concerns herself with addressing some of the following questions.

1. What are the features of the contemporary writing classroom?
2. What do we know about the process of writing?
3. What are the characteristics of skilled and unskilled writers?
4. How can we take a process approach to writing?
5. How can we encourage learners in successful writing strategies
6. How can we help learners to build awareness of discourse organization?
7. How can we help learners to develop crafting skills?

The answer to the first question according to Hedge is that the students are engaged in the composing experience itself. Students are expected to be engaged in contextualised pieces of writing. Writing does not end as it is put down on the page for the first time and with the expectation that the teacher will make an improvement on it. In a contemporary classroom also manifesting will be a 'dynamic teaching/learning relationship between writers and their readers (Zamel, in Hedge: 302). The other students and the teacher are taken as readers in this case. They can question, prompt, support, and provide ideas and language which help the writer to be clear. This research intended to find out how semantic mapping can fit in with what goes on in a contemporary classroom. For question two, the answer according to Hedge is that writing should be seen as thinking and as discovery. Writing is the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process, which is of gradually developing a text. She also indicates that it involves setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it. This research intended to establish how semantic mapping can fit in to the process approach to the teaching and learning of writing.

Question three is addressed by Zamel's (1983) study where it emerged that planning was not a single phase but a thinking activity to which writers returned again and again during composing. Writers have writing strategies that include writing notes or lists or diagrams. The other observation was that writing was recursive and generative with students re-reading their work reacting to it and moving on. Raimes (1985) also confirmed studies by Zamel that successful writers consult their own background knowledge and that they incubate ideas. This study hoped to establish how semantic mapping has any relationship with Zamel's observations. Kathleen (1993) made the observation that when learning a new skill, her students required additional practice which often occurs in cooperative learning groups. She indicates in her studies that students enjoy working in groups because group work provided an opportunity for peer tutoring. There is also room that students subject themselves to peer evaluation through group presentations. Hedge(2000) also makes the observation that students can be encouraged to generate ideas by working in pairs where they would arrive at an understanding of the task by questioning and clarifying meanings of key expressions and ideas and selecting the information needed to fulfill the task. It is going to be assessed in this study how far semantic mapping could be used to improve cooperative learning in the classroom.

Washington (1985), in her study of semantic mapping called '*A heuristic for Helping Learning Disabled Students Write report*', notes that learning disabled readers have difficulty using text organization to comprehend expository material and in writing well structured compositions. She comments that a semantic mapping heuristic provides teachers with a reading writing strategy that provides instruction in note taking, that is, selecting relevant information, recognizing main ideas and pertinent details and sorting and organizing them into a well written report. We note here that Washington's studies are centered on the disabled and in particularly handling report writing. She noted in her studies that children's' comprehension and ability to organise their ideas for writing improved. This study intended to confirm whether composition writing can be taken beyond report writing to other forms of writing such as descriptive writing using semantic mapping. The study concentrated on composition writing and not reading for comprehension as time and resources would not permit it. Kalgran (1992) also interested herself with disabled students and established that semantic mapping is offered as a pre-writing strategy and that it helps students at all ages with hearing impairments organise and structure their writing.

It also offered visual access to the writing process. In her research Kalgran worked with learners of English as a first language. This research wants to establish how this visual access can improve the writing skills of ESL learners.

1.7 The process of writing

For Ur (1991), writing is a process. Writing is a messy business. The writer proceeds with indicating that most people proceed through a number of untidy drafts before reaching a final version. Learners should be encouraged to work through a number of revisions; to accept messy drafts as a positive, even essential stage in writing; to treat early drafts as transition stages to be criticized but not formally assessed, she adds. Ur goes on to make the observation that writing can be potentially satisfying and it can be absorbing. Writing is also learnt through writing. Following, Ur this research intended to establish how semantic mapping can be 'messy' and how potentially satisfying it can be as part of the writing process.

1.8 Population

The population for this study was a group made up of 44 ESL Form Three students. Four English language teachers also participated in the research.

1.9 Sample

Forty four (44) ESL Form Three students were purposively sampled for this study. Four language teachers at the school were also purposively selected.

1.10 Presentation analysis and discussion of results

It was indicated that an experimental design was used for this research. The pre-exercise, post-exercise and interview guide were used as instruments for collecting data this research. An attempt will be made to address each of the research questions to find out on the effectiveness of using semantic mapping to help ESL students write compositions better. Students were given numbers to identify them for ethical reasons. A total of 44 students and four teachers participated in the research. Forty four students attempted both composition A and Composition B.

The marks are presented in two tables: Table A and Table B

Question 1 and 2 on the interview guide were designed to find out teachers views on the performance of pupils in composition writing

Question 1: How would you rate the performance of your students in composition writing?

The four teachers interviewed had this to say:

'Pupils are performing poorly especially with the free compositions'

'They are not doing well especially with organizational skills'

'Most students are operating between the D- to C- grade. Very few students fulfill the requirements of B+ grade'

The data gathered from question one of the interview guide confirmed the poor performance of the students in composition writing but with varying reasons on why this was so. On further probing on what teachers' attributed the poor performance to, the teachers had the following responses:

'Poor planning'

'Inappropriate use of vocabulary'

'Lack of extensive reading'

'Poor language background'

'Lack of interest in composition writing'

The responses clearly indicate that the teachers put the blame on students' poor performance squarely on the student. Teachers seemed unaware of the possibility that their own approaches to the teaching of composition writing could be responsible for the poor planning, that is, the lack of vocabulary, poor language and lack of interest in handling composition writing. In a situation where the teacher blamed the students, teachers do not think much about improving methodology.

The research now presents data that helped to answer the main research question which was :

Does semantic mapping help in improving learners’ composition writing skills?

Table A is made up of students who wrote two compositions without exposure to the concept of semantic mapping.

Table A students who wrote both compositions without exposure to semantic mapping N=22

Student	Composition A Without exposure marked out of 30	Composition B Without exposure marked out of 30	Differences
1	12	9	3
2	11	8	3
3	15	12	3
4	13	12	1
5	15	13	2
6	11	10	1
7	10	12	-2
8	9	11	-2
9	11	13	-2
10	8	10	-2
11	7	7	0
12	13	12	1
13	14	12	2
14	14	11	3
15	8	9	-1
16	7	7	0
17	7	7	0
18	12	11	1
19	11	12	-1
20	9	9	0
21	7	8	-1
22	13	12	1

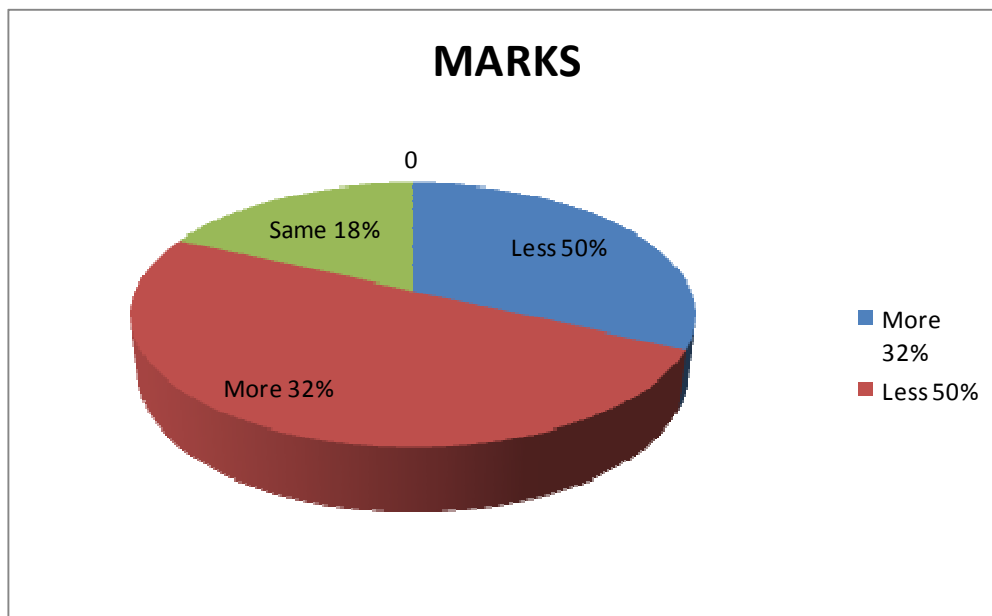


Table B is made up of students who wrote composition A without the knowledge of semantic mapping and composition B having had exposure to semantic mapping.

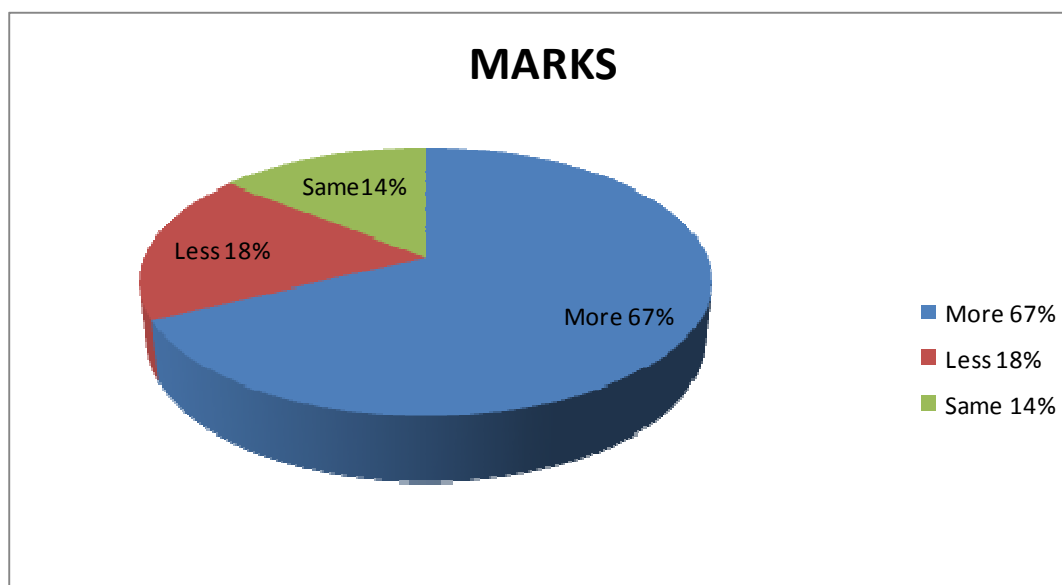
Twenty two (100%) students attempted both compositions A and B without knowledge of semantic mapping. Eleven students (50%) got lower marks in composition B than they did for composition A. Seven students got more marks than they did for composition A. four (18 %) students remained in the same performance grade. Of those who indicated a drop, four students dropped by three marks. This, in itself is a worrisome drop in performance. Giving compositions without assisting attests more to testing and continues testing does not improve composition writing skills. Four students showed an improvement of plus 2 but this is against a group of twenty two students.

These results clearly show that if students do not get meaningful assistance, they will not show improvement in their writing of compositions. There are many weaknesses that students manifest in composition writing such as spellings, organizational and inadequate vocabulary for a particular subject. The main weakness displayed in the compositions is a lack of appropriate vocabulary to express themselves. If one has no language for a particular topic, then talking about the topic is inhibited.

Table B shows results of compositions that were written before and after an exposure to semantic mapping in an attempt to find out if semantic mapping is of assistance in helping students write better compositions. In writing the first composition, there was no appreciation that writing is a process and there was no emphasis on prewriting activities.

Table B students who wrote the first composition A without knowledge of semantic mapping and composition B having had exposure to semantic mapping

student	composition A without exposure	with exposure	differences
23	10	12	-2
24	12	11	1
25	13	10	3
26	12	14	-2
27	11	12	-1
28	12	11	1
29	14	14	0
30	10	15	-5
31	10	11	-1
32	10	11	-1
33	8	13	-5
34	8	10	-2
35	13	12	1
36	14	16	-2
37	13	13	0
38	11	12	-1
39	12	12	0
40	10	16	-6
41	6	12	-6
42	9	12	-3
43	11	14	-3
44	13	12	1



Twenty two students attempted two compositions; composition A without a knowledge of semantic mapping and composition B with a knowledge of semantic mapping. Five students out of 22 got lower marks than they got in composition A compared to nine in Table 1. Fourteen students out of twenty two got higher marks than they did in composition A compared to seven in Table 1 indicating a substantial improvement in performance. Significant differences are noted on those who scored higher in composition B. there are staggering differences of 6 marks indicating that students had gained from a conceptualization of semantic mapping before they had attempted the second composition.

Results in Table B is a clear indication that students who had an exposure to semantic mapping benefited more than those who did not have a knowledge of semantic mapping. An analysis of compositions written by students who used a semantic map revealed that compositions increased in readability since students were able to express themselves. They had a language for what they wanted to talk about. In writing composition B, there was that appreciation that writing is a 'messy' process. Pupils got messy in coming up with semantic maps, a pre-writing activity that had students focused on what they wanted to write about.

Research question one

How generative is semantic mapping?

Question 4 of the interview guide attempted to address question one of the sub- research questions.

Question 4: How do you help students to generate information before students write composition work?

The following responses were given by the teachers

By using spider plans,

Brainstorming

By using debates in class

By giving them a skeletal plan

It can be noted from the data gathered that teachers see the need for pre-exercises before composition writing but the weaknesses are that they do not specifically deal with issues of appropriate vocabulary that help students to express themselves clearly by using the language of the particular topic. The researcher also went on to find information on the expectations of teachers on what students should do before composition writing. Teachers had the following to say.

What do you expect your students to do before they write their compositions?

'Write down ideas or brainstorm ideas'

'Provide the composition with a plan'

'Read around a given topic'

'Discuss topic in groups'

From the data gathered above, it can be observed that pupils may be told what to do but might not be shown how. The activities might be useful but might be limiting in preparing students to gather information in preparation for the writing of the compositions. It can also be observed that pupils enter the writing activity with little preparation therefore the need to try out possibilities of using semantic mapping.

The observation made was that students who wrote compositions without engaging in creating semantic maps attempted writing without any pre-writing activities. This did not help in making students generative. Those who had exposure first of all had to come up with a semantic map. Semantic maps provide an opportunity for task based learning. Students had to accomplish the task of coming up with a semantic map. They also developed awareness that much of their writing was to be controlled by the semantic map. It was also interesting to note that some students went on to come up with more words and relationships of these words once they conceptualized the skill of semantic mapping. The study also helped to confirm findings by Kathleen (1993) that the use of semantic mapping helps young students learn to write. The study also confirmed observations made by Johnson, Peterman and Heimlich (1986) that semantic mapping promotes categorical structuring of information by displaying known and new words under labeled categories or conceptual subtopics. Well labeled categories of language and ideas related to a bus terminus were produced following the example used during the lesson on semantic mapping. We now look at research question number 2

Research question two

How useful is semantic mapping as an information gap activity?

In line with the observation made by Masters Mori and Mori (1993) semantic mapping helped students to link known words and new words. This was made possible because students came in with different words, some known to the class but others not known. Relations to new and known words were noted as students tried to categorise them. They were also able to link known information about a busy bus terminus with new information in the same manner as they did with the words. Linking new information with previous experience helped students to develop new vocabulary. Students were able to identify meanings and uses of words, clarify ideas, highlight major conclusions, identify key elements, expand ideas and summarise information about a busy bus terminus. The semantic maps produced by students enabled students to discuss information with clarity.

Hedge (2000) holds the view that writing should be seen as thinking and as discovery. Thinking and discovery can only be seen in the light of filling in information gaps. During the discussion phase on semantic mapping, initially the semantic maps were skeletal but with time, the skeletons gained in detail. The study confirmed the observation that writing is a result of employing strategies to manage the composing process which is gradually developing a text. Hedge (2000) indicates that writing involves setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it. Semantic mapping was found to be useful in generating ideas as a pre-writing activity.

Zamel' (1983) makes the observation that writing is not a single phase but a thinking activity to which writers returned again and again during composing. To help in filling in gaps, students continued to visit the semantic plans and new notes were added. The other observation made confirmed Zamel's claims that writing is recursive and generative with students re-reading their work, reacting to it and moving on.

What do you think could be done to improve students' composition writing skills?

'Encouraging students to read widely'

'Giving pupils more written work'

'By giving students a frame to follow in writing their compositions'

'By setting composition topics that students are familiar with'

Research question three

How far is semantic mapping a student centred approach?

Question 5 of the interview guide : What role does task based learning play in composition writing?

'Never use it in my class'

'It is time consuming'

'Have no idea what that is'

Research has indicated that teachers talk more than they should when current practice in teaching expects that the learner should be involved more than the teacher. Semantic mapping provided students with the opportunity to build semantic maps thereby becoming more involved than the teacher. There was a lot of pupil interaction as the teacher remained on the sidelines only coming in to assist when students were experiencing difficulties. Using semantic mapping also equated to task based learning. Building a semantic map was the task that the students were to accomplish. Task based learning puts students at the centre of learning more than the lecture method and other teacher centered approaches. They worked towards that goal as evidenced by the semantic maps the groups came up with. Learners were engaged in meaningful activities to construct their own knowledge which they will remember more than the information that they are given by the teacher.

Research question four

1. How far is semantic mapping a cooperative activity?

Question 6 of interview guide: What role does cooperative learning play in composition writing?

My students write compositions as individuals

I do not use it in teaching composition writing

The data above indicates that teachers do not focus students by giving students activities that facilitate assistance from each other.

Kathleen (1993) made the observation that when learning a new skill, her students required additional practice which often occurs in cooperative learning groups. The observation made in this study was that pupils realised that competition or working as individuals did not bear fruit since they were working on developing a new skill, that is, semantic mapping. Kathleen indicates in her studies that students enjoy working in groups because group work provided an opportunity for peer tutoring. It was noted that semantic mapping created the opportunity for peer teaching. Group members had something to bring to the group. Ideas that were not clear were worked on. During class presentations, students subjected themselves to peers' evaluation as meaningful comments were made.

1.11 Discussion

Main research question

Does semantic mapping assist students to write compositions better?

Students who have knowledge of semantic mapping tend to write better compositions than those who do not have knowledge of semantic mapping. Teachers who approach compositions without any pre-writing activities appear to be continuously testing students without offering any assistance to improving students' skills in composition writing. Students who go through a process of creating a semantic map improve in self expression since they have the language they need to talk about a given topic.

How generative is semantic mapping?

Semantic mapping can be used as a pre-writing activity that can lead to the generation of words and ideas relating to a particular topic. Students can use semantic mapping as some form of self assessment. Skeletal information might reflect that a particular student has not put much effort during the first stages of composition writing.

How useful is semantic mapping as an information gap activity?

Semantic mapping was found to be an appropriate information gap activity. Writing compositions without going through semantic mapping might lead to leaving out a lot of content words and ideas that would otherwise make a composition read better. Individual students quickly realize how scanty their information is. Students get information from each other. This will help self expression. Language is also learnt in a given context as opposed to the continuous testing approach.

How far is semantic mapping a student centred approach?

Semantic mapping was observed to be an activity that offers students the opportunity to learn by doing. The learner takes a central role in the learning process. The teacher comes in to guide the student who has a task to accomplish. Semantic mapping relates closely with task based learning. Students are likely to be purposeful in their learning if they have a task to achieve.

How far is semantic mapping a cooperative activity?

The study concludes that semantic mapping can be both an individual or cooperative activity but more importantly that it works as a cooperative activity that opens opportunities for bringing pupils' experiences together. Words that one student knows might not be known by other members of the group. Cooperative learning is important in a writing class since no one student can claim knowledge of every word that relates to a particular topic. Pupils will also learn better in a situation where they see their efforts being acknowledged by other members of the group. It is easier for a teacher to quickly assess conceptualisation of a topic through assessing the performance of a group.

1.12 Recommendations

a) Recommendation for teachers

In view of the above findings, the researcher makes the recommendations that:

- Teachers should engage students in prewriting activities
- Teachers should guide students in activities that help to generate information
- Teachers should assist students in information gap activities
- Students should be engaged in cooperative learning so that they assist each other in the learning process.

a) Recommendations for Heads of Departments

- In order to assist teachers to be better placed in improving the writing skills of students, Heads of Departments should emphasise the importance of pre-writing activities.
- Heads of Departments should see to it that teachers engage students in activities that generate information before students write compositions.
- Heads of Departments should emphasise the importance of information gap activities before compositions are written.
- Heads of departments should see to it that teachers create opportunities for cooperative learning so that students help each other in their learning.

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