Using Controlled and Guided Practice as an Instructional Writing Strategy in Academic Contrast-Comparison Essays

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Abstract
This instructional writing strategy paper overviews the process of controlled and guided practice in the teaching of outlining and writing contrast-comparison essays for English as a second language writers for academic purposes (EAP). The focus of this instructional strategy emphasizes the theories from Contrastive Rhetoric, Schema Theory and Ausubel’s Subsumption Theory and uses the pedagogical tool of Bloom’s Taxonomy as the framework for the implementation of this instructional writing strategy. The relevance of this instructional writing strategy offers the student a natural and specific structure to help analyze, reshape and reframe their knowledge and writing style to the rhetorical structure of an English contrast-comparison academic essay. The re-framing of background knowledge is applied to the specific elements of outlining, expanding the outline into a detailed outline to include developing the introduction paragraph, thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion paragraph.

Introduction
Non-native English writers find themselves ill prepared when it comes to the academic writing style required in institutions of higher learning in the United States, specifically the rhetorical organizational skills of university level English second language writers in contrast-comparison academic essays. They generally enter an academic program with the necessary basic reading and writing skills needed to comprehend and summarize journal articles. However, the specific and essential rhetorical organizational and writing skills needed to compose contrast-comparison academic outlines and essays remain under-developed and is often a stumbling block for many non-native English writers.

Theoretical Background
There is an old adage that says, “Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand.” Involvement in the writing process is critical to the creation and understanding of writing and the writing process. Possessing writing skills in academic contrast-comparison essays empowers the writer to draw on the necessary analytical skills needed for university level academic writing. It also requires making decisions and choices which may not be familiar to the writer. These analytical writing skills are developed during the socialization process in learning to read and write in the native culture and language. The relationship of learning to read and write in the native text and language and the rhetorical writing style is taught with the instructional strategies specific to the native culture and language as well as through the literacy practices of the culture. This discourse is reinforced by the social constructs, cultural background, and institutions of that culture such as family, friends, school, literacy
practices, business and church. This discourse is also embedded in the long-term memory of the writer and available whenever the writer needs to access this cognitive knowledge structure. The discourse of academic writing in the U.S. employs a different perspective and analysis of information that is shaped by our language, social constructs and cultural institutions.

The challenges of non-native speakers and writers of English is in their rhetorical style of writing has been rooted in their own native language and history which is different from English. Reaching into their long-term memory of writing experiences, this new and different perspective and cognitive structure of information is not available to the writer. The genre of contrast-comparison academic essay writing may not be organized in the same style or order in the cognitive structures of long-term memory. The student’s professional discourse, generally speaking, has been cultivated in the native language and rhetorical writing style of that language and culture. If that professional discourse does not encompass the English academic writing style, that is critical analysis of fact and opinion, then it must be learned. The writing preparation and process in English contrast-comparison academic essays is very discipline specific and many non-native English writers are ill prepared for this rhetorical writing style. The non-English writer soon realizes their knowledge gap in creating and writing in a new rhetorical organizational style. Their long term memory, processes and cognitive structures have been built on generating and organizing ideas in a different rhetorical paradigm. Flower and Hayes (1981) aptly present this phenomena,

The process of organizing appears to play an important part in creative thinking and discovery since it is capable of grouping ideas and forming new concepts. More specifically, the organizing process allows the writer to identify categories, to search for subordinate ideas which develop a current topic, and to search for superordinate ideas which include or subsume the current topic. At another level the process of organizing also attends to more strictly textual decisions about the presentation and ordering of the text. (Flower & Hayes, 1981)

Many universities offer advanced academic writing classes for non-native English writers and students attending the university. The recognition that non-native English speakers and writers need support in this discourse style, which is new to them, opens the door to compare the contrasting discourse and rhetorical writing styles of those non-native English writers. These advanced academic writing classes highlight the comparisons in discourse and affords the opportunity for the instructor to capitalize on the theories of Contrastive Rhetoric, Schema Theory and Ausubel’s Subsumption Theory.

The theory of Contrastive Rhetoric stems from Kaplan’s original work in 1966 “which was concerned with paragraph organization, was useful for in accounting for cultural differences in essays written by college students for academic purposes” (Connor, 2002, p. 495). Since 1966, there have been other studies that contribute to the expansion of Contrastive Rhetoric to shape a new direction of this field. Connor (2002) chronicles the thirty years of Contrastive Rhetoric Theory starting with Kaplan.

“Kaplan’s (1966) pioneering study analyzed the organization of paragraphs in ESL student essays and identified five types of paragraph development, each
reflecting distinctive rhetorical tendencies. Kaplan claimed that Anglo-European expository essays are developed linearly whereas essays in Semitic languages use parallel coordinate clauses; those in Oriental languages prefer an indirect approach, coming to the point in the end; and those in Romance languages and in Russian include material that, from a linear point of view, is irrelevant” (Connor, 2002, p. 494).

In preparing non-native English writers for the rigors of academic literacy, we look to research that can provide the theoretical foundation in cognitive learning and writing. Ausubel’s Subsumption Theory explains the “the cognitive theory of learning through a contrast of rote learning and meaning learning” (Brown, 2007). Ausubel’s theory addresses the organization and storage of new knowledge along with the anchoring of that new knowledge to the relevant hierarchical cognitive structures through the use of visual organizers. Using the example of learning how a contrast-comparison university level academic essay is organized is a great example of learning how a contrast-comparison university level academic essay should be organized (new rhetorical writing style) with the current and background knowledge and the non-native English writer’s native rhetorical writing style (existing cognitive structures). If those cognitive structures have little or no association, the new knowledge will not be retained and the eventual forgetting of this new knowledge is inevitable. There is no cognitive peg on which to hang the new knowledge therefore the new knowledge is not subsumed.

Schema Theory provides us with the knowledge of how people organize background knowledge about the world. Piaget and Anderson have contributed to this generalized theory which seeks to understand how knowledge is cognitively represented. The assertion of Schema Theory is when people learn; the knowledge that is learned is created in a schema, or a unit of knowledge, and is linked to other existing schemas, or units of knowledge. How a person links schema is different and how that schema is shaped by shared schemas within a culture and language is different. The shared schema, or shared background knowledge, is what enables successful communication in oral or written form. The use of visual organizers as a pre-writing activity enables the learner to develop construct and develop their schema and their own ideas in the new rhetorical writing style and outline of a contrast-comparison essay. The use of visual organizers enhances the learner’s ability to visually and spatially access current and background knowledge and aides in the organization of that knowledge into the new structure of a contrast-comparison outline.

The contrast between Ausubel’s theory and perspective of universal learning and Schema Theory is that the hierarchical structures in Schema Theory are actively constructed and stored by the shared meaningful representation of the knowledge. The art of teaching the skills of critical analysis, which are necessary for the organization and writing of university level contrast-comparison academic essays, lends itself to the taxonomy of Bloom’s educational objectives and the auspices of Subsumption Theory, Schema Theory and Contrastive Rhetoric

The instructional strategy of using controlled and guided practice in writing contrast-comparison academic essays makes use of Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational
objectives. These educational objectives best exemplify the adult learners’ cognitive learning strategies. Bloom’s Taxonomy identifies behaviors that are important to learning. Changing behavior, whether in reading and writing or in other socialization processes, requires an opportunity to model and practice the targeted new behavior. This controlled and guided reinforcement at different stages of the targeted new behavior aides in the cognitive and structural reorganization of current and background knowledge. The relevance of using Bloom’s Taxonomy as an instructional strategy is in the three domains of learning: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Within each domain are skill categories which will guide the implementation of the instructional strategy, controlled and guided practice. In the cognitive domain, the analysis skill category addresses the learner’s ability “to separate material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Meaning, the learner is able to distinguish between facts and inferences” as outlined in one illustrative website provided by Don Clark (http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html). Here is where the use of visual graphic organizers, such as Venn Diagrams and Compare and Contrast Frames, are used so that the student utilizes and strengthens their analytical skills.

The affective domain includes the skills of organization and can be defined as the ability to organize values into priorities by contrasting different values, resolving conflicts between them, and creating a unique value system. Here, the emphasis is on comparing, relating, and synthesizing values. Again, Don Clark’s website provides further exemplification of this concept. The controlled and guided practice of writing the reorganized knowledge from the visual graphic organizers into and academic contrast-compare essay stimulates and reinforces the knowledge into the new rhetorical writing style. The psychomotor domain affords us the ability to develop the above mentioned skills which requires practice. “This practice is measured in terms of speed, precision, distance, procedures, or techniques in execution” (Clark, 1999). Guided response is a skill, which in the early stages in learning a complex skill includes imitation and trial and error. Adequacy and proficiency of performance is achieved by practicing. This writing instructional strategy guides the student to:

“recall and use previous learned knowledge or remembering knowledge, which includes specific facts to complete theories; the student translates the material from one form to another by comprehension of the material either by understanding and explaining or interpreting the material (existing knowledge); the process helps the student break down the material into its component parts, analyze the relationship between parts and recognize the organizational principles involved; the student synthesizes or puts the parts together which is creating a new whole (reorganized knowledge); the student then evaluates the material based on specific criteria.” (Clark, 1999)
Figure 1 pictures the means by which the instructional strategy of controlled and guided practice enhances and facilitates the rhetorical organizational skills in contrast-comparison essay academic writing of university level English second language writers through meaningful learning. Controlled and guided practice artfully applies and mirrors the theories of Subsumption, Schema, Contrastive Rhetoric and employs the pedagogical tool, Bloom’s Taxonomy. Involving the student in the access of background knowledge in their native language using visual graphic organizers and controlled and guided practice reorganizing existing knowledge into the organizational writing structure of contrast-comparison academic English rhetorical writing style is the crux of the old adage, “Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand”.

Practical Application and Techniques

The organizational elements of a detailed outline for a contrast-comparison academic essay (including the development of the introduction paragraph, thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion paragraph) are the specific focus of this instructional strategy. These elements can be assessed using the specific institutional rubric of an academic contrast-comparison essay writing course and Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Providing the student with Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Venn Diagrams, Two Concept Comparison Frame or a Comparison Frame is a first step in this instructional strategy. The elements of outlining, expanding the outline into a detailed outline to include developing the introduction paragraph, thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion paragraph, can be implemented using Venn Diagrams and Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational objectives. The instructor will activate prior knowledge, a level of learning, which will be supported by the use of graphic organizers, Venn Diagrams, Two Concept Comparison Frame or a Comparison Frame, to help the student recall identify and outline their prior knowledge of content in the native language rhetorical organizational style. The use of the graphic organizers supports the student in “translating material from one form to another,” meaning their background knowledge organized in their native language rhetorical writing style will translated to the new form of an English contrast-comparison outline as found on Don Clark’s website (www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html). The comprehension of material and translation of the material are important skills in discriminating and constructing the translatable material into the new form. The controlled and guided practice in applying the material into the new and concrete rhetorical writing style supports the student in “analyzing the relationship between the parts and the recognition of the organizational
principles” involved in this process (Clark, 1999). The controlled and guided practice supports the level of learning and the skill of synthesis. It is the student’s ability to put parts together to form a new whole, the English contrast-comparison outline which is the new rhetorical organizational style and which requires the controlled and guided practice. This reconstruction of background knowledge utilizes the graphic organizer with optimum benefits to relate the knowledge into the reorganized form. The student can evaluate their new form, English contrast-comparison outline, and will be “evaluated on defined external criteria” using the institutional scoring rubric and Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Clark, 1999).

**Conclusion**

The organizational elements of an outline and a detailed outline for a contrast-comparison academic essay include the development of the overall structure of the contrast-comparison essay. The detailed outline and development of the introduction paragraph, thesis statement, body paragraphs and conclusion paragraph are the specific focal points. The instructor and non-native English writer can evaluate the progress toward the new rhetorical writing style using the educational objectives of Bloom’s Taxonomy, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These objectives and the organizational elements of an academic contrast-comparison essay can also be evaluated using the rubric of the academic writing course or program.

It is predicted the instructional writing strategy will provide English second language writers with a foundation for the concept of organizational skills in outlining university level English academic contrast-comparison essays, as characterized by Bloom’s Taxonomy of educational objectives. It is conceivable that acquiring this writing skill could be limited by length of time spent on this particular academic rhetorical writing style if other rhetorical styles of writing will be introduced in the same instructional time period.

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References


**Another Useful Website for Bloom’s Taxonomy**

http://www.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm