The Role of Clustering as a Prewriting Strategy in Improving EFL Students' Writing Performance: The Case of Third Year Literary Stream Classes at Zeribet El-Oued Secondary Schools -Biskra-

دور التجميع كإستراتيجية تمهيدية في تحسين أداء كتابة طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية:أقسام السنة الثالثة شعبة آداب، ثانويتا زريبة الوادي- بسكرة- أنموذجا

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Abstract

Prewriting is an important part of the writing process. However, it is often the neglected stage since most of learners start composing directly without planning what they will write. In this scope, the present study investigates the role of clustering as a prewriting strategy in improving learners' writing performance.

The aim is to gauge teachers' and students' perceptions of the significance of clustering in enhancing students' outcomes. To achieve this aim, a questionnaire was administered to 60 third year literary stream students at secondary schools of Zeribet El-Oued, Biskra and a semi-structured interview was conducted with seven teachers of English of the same secondary schools. The results showed that clustering is very helpful since students gain more vocabulary, generate plenty of ideas and produce well-organized paragraphs.

الملخص:

الكتابة المسبقة هي جزء مهم من عملية الكتابة. ومع ذلك، غالبا ما تكون مرحلة مهملة لان معظم المتعلمين يبدؤون في التأليف مباشرة دون التخطيط لما يكتبون. في هذا النطاق، تبحث الدراسة الحالية عن دور التجميع كإستراتيجية تمهيدية في تحسين أداء الكتابة لدى المتعلمين.

الهدف من هذا البحث هو قياس تصورات الأساتذة والتلاميذ حول أهمية هذه التقنية في تعزيز نتائج التلاميذ. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، وزع استبيان على 60 تلميذ من السنة الثالثة شعبة آداب بثانويتي زريبة الوادي، بسكرة. كما أجريت مقابلة مع سبع أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية بنفس الثانويتين. النتائج بينت أن إستراتيجية التجميع جد مفيدة حيث تساعد التلاميذ على اكتساب المزيد من المفردات، توليد وفير للأفكار وإنتاج فقرات محكمة التنظيم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إستراتيجية التجميع، أداء الكتابة، الكتابة المسبقة، عملية الكتابة.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a crucial medium to communicate thoughts and ideas. It is the final skill in the process of communication that EFL students need to develop and master after listening, speaking and reading. However, learning how to write effectively and efficiently in English language always constitutes the most challenging aspect of the teaching learning process because the problem is that most learners start writing

directly without making any planning (the pre-writing strategies). They sometimes either face a sort of mental block that hinders them from jotting down what come to their minds or they have a lot of random ideas that need some guidance to be expressed in a logical way.

Therefore, training students in the pre-writing strategy of clustering can help them compose plenty of thoughts that can be then grouped and organized according to their logical relations. In this context, the current study aims at exploring secondary school teachers' and students' perceptions of the use of clustering technique in improving students' writing skills. The paper used a questionnaire with students and a semi-structured interview with teachers to gauge their attitudes towards the significance of clustering in teaching and learning the writing skill.

2. The Process of Writing

Writing is a vital macro skill that takes an important part in the entire worldwide curriculum as it determines the learners' success in English. This productive skill has a complex nature that is why it has been defined from different perspectives by many authors such as (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 1996; Kroll, 1990; and others). Langan noted that" writing is a skill, not a "natural gift". It is a skill like driving, typing or cooking; and, like any skill, it can be learned"(2008, p. 13). Unlike speech which must be acquired naturally at an early age, writing can be learned like any other skill.

Writing is a process of discovery that requires the writer to follow several nonlinear stages which are: prewriting, composing/ drafting, revising, editing and publishing (Tribble,

1996). Besides, Brown and Hood (1989) described the writing process in three main steps: preparing to write, drafting and revising. During the first stage, you need to identify your audience, your purpose, the content and the situation. When you are drafting, you just put your ideas onto paper without paying attention to writing conventions. In revising, you check that you have conveyed the message clearly and appropriately.

3. Prewriting Strategies

The prewriting stage or getting ready to write is a set of "activities in which writers look for a topic or for ideas and language related to a topic before beginning writing" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p.106). Thus, it is considered the most daunting and demanding stage for learners to go through and for writing teachers to opt for the best prewriting strategy that meets all the students' needs and capacities. Actually, planning for any writing assignment needs such effective tools as free writing, mind mapping, webbing, listing, questioning, clustering and others that make the process of prewriting much easier and fruitful.

According to Mogahed (2013), prewriting activities can be divided into two sections: invention and arrangement. The first step is used to generate ideas and thoughts. It includes: brainstorming, clustering, free writing, looping, listing and interviewing. The latter is applied to arrange the ideas which have been produced in the former step. It covers: graphic organizers, charts, webbing and others. These prewriting strategies are of such great importance that they can help students generate and organize ideas, as well as enhance their writing achievement and attitudes. They are considered a source of motivation for reluctant writers and a way to develop critical

thinking and planning skills.

4. Clustering

The concept of clustering has been named differently as mind mapping, webbing, pattern notes and diagramming. This notion was coined by Gabrielle Lusser Rico. She defines it as a "nonlinear brainstorming process akin to free association. It makes a design-mind process visible through a nonlinear spilling out of lightning associations that allows patterns to emerge" (2000, p.28). It is apparent that clustering is a non-linear visual strategy that permits the writer to start generating ideas and thoughts without a clear order. According to Axelrod and Cooper, the process of clustering goes through the following steps:

1. In a word or phrase, the topic is written in the center of a piece of paper. Circle it.

2. Also in words or phrases, writers should write down the main parts or ideas of the topic. Circle these, and connect them with lines to the topic in the center.

3. Next, they should write down facts, details, and examples related to these main parts or ideas. Connect them with lines to the relevant main parts or ideas (2015, p. 283). A sample of clustering is shown below as follows:

Fig.1. A Model of Clustering
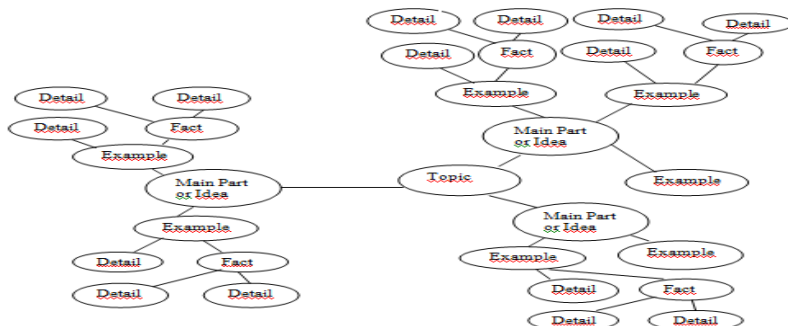
Source: Axelrod & Cooper, 2015, p.283

To apply the clustering technique, the writer starts firstly with writing the topic inside a circle at the middle of the paper. Then, s/he jots down in circles ideas, words or notes and links them with the topic at the middle of the page using lines. Later, s/he ends up this process with writing down facts and details about these notes and link those facts and examples with their notes using lines too.

Clustering plays an important role in writing classrooms. Raya (2013) stated that the prewriting strategy of clustering helps learners generate ideas, understand the relationships between those ideas and connect them with each other. It is also useful to link the learners' prerequisites with new data. Maula (2010), for her part, emphasizes the role of clustering as a source of motivation that stimulates learners to jot down ideas and organize them to be exploited at further steps. Moreover, Langan said:" this method is helpful for people who like to do their thinking in a visual way" (2008, p .30). Hence, this technique is so beneficial to learners who want to see their ideas and thoughts in front of them using illustration.

5. Research on Clustering

Recently, the idea of exploring the effectiveness of clustering strategy in teaching writing has been received much attention of a great number of researchers as (Amaliah, 2018; Hayati, 2017; Styati, 2010; Sugiarti, 2012 and others).Therefore, many studies were ventured on this area to help learners think visually and improve their writing abilities.

Maula (2010) carried out a study on the effectiveness of clustering technique in teaching writing of narrative text at the tenth grade students of SMA PGRI56 CIPUTAT. Maula's research aimed at examining if the application of clustering is helpful to enhance the learners' narrative writing. In this light, the researcher used an experimental method with forty students to achieve the underlined aim, as well as different data gathering tools, including the following: observations, documentations, questionnaires and test. The findings showed that the use of clustering enabled learners to mark higher scores than before.

Fajriyani (2011) conducted a research under the title: "Improving Students' Writing Ability through Clustering Technique". It was a classroom action research into second year of SMP Al- Hasra Bojongsari- Depok during 2010-2011. The number of participants was 31 students. The researcher used different data gathering tools which included tests, questionnaire, interviews and field notes. The obtained results showed that there was a progress and a positive change in the students' scores after each cycle. They also revealed that clustering could improve the students' writing abilities.

Suheni (2011) investigated the use of the clustering technique to improve 34 eleventh year students' ability in writing analytical expositions. The study was an experimental research into senior high school 1 Weru Sukoharjo. Based on the

data gained from tests and students' questionnaire, clustering was an effective tool for helping students generate more ideas and improve their writing analytical texts.

Inal (2014) examined the effects of the clustering strategy on improving Turkish students' narrative writing and their writing attitudes. To find out the influence of this strategy on 47 first year university students, the researcher implemented a quasi- experimental method and questionnaires. Both descriptive and statistical analysis was used to interpret the obtained information. The findings unveiled that the experimental group scores and attitudes were positive than the control group.

Fitri (2018) examined the effect of clustering technique on students' achievement in writing descriptive and recount paragraphs of the second grade students of SMAN 1 Kuala Tungkal. In this study, Fitri used the simple random sampling and the quasi experimental method to test the effectiveness of this strategy. Data were collected from both progressive test and post-test which were analyzed by comparing the mean scores of the two groups' progressive test as well as comparing the calculated t-test value. The results revealed that clustering technique provided considerable impact on the students' paragraph writing.

The conclusion that one can draw is that the prewriting technique of clustering confirmed to improve the students' writing performance.

6. Methodology

This work aimed at finding out whether third year literary students are familiar with the prewriting strategy of clustering. The aim is also to explore both students' and teachers' attitudes towards the role of this technique in overcoming some writing difficulties. Accordingly, we hypothesized that the clustering

strategy is presented to third year students, but it is not implemented successfully in writing classes. This means that not all the participants are well trained to perform this strategy. In this light, we attempt to answer the following questions:

-Are EFL students at Zeribet El-Oued secondary schools familiar with the prewriting strategy of clustering?

-What are EFL students' perceptions of the role of clustering in improving their writing production?

-What are EFL teachers' perceptions of the importance of clustering in improving students' writing performance?

6.1 Research Method

This paper was meant to explore EFL teachers and students' perceptions of the role of clustering as a prewriting strategy in improving the students' writing production. In order to reach that aim and to answer the above research questions, the descriptive method was used in this investigation. Burns and Grove (2001) asserted that the descriptive research is an appropriate choice to determine the problem or topic for the sake of knowing about how to improve outcomes.

6.2 Participants

The study sample involved 60 literary stream students at the secondary schools of Zeribet El-Oued, Biskra (two schools) and all the teachers (seven teachers) of English from the same schools. The students participants were 41 females and 19 males between 17 and 19 years old randomly selected out of the population of 130 students. The teachers are all full-time teachers with an experience in teaching English at secondary schools ranged from 6 to 14 years. This shows that they still have the power to try various strategies that facilitate the process of prewriting.

6.3 Instruments

Regarding data collection tool, a questionnaire was administered to students to collect data on their views of the role of clustering in improving their writing performance. The questionnaire made up of multiple choice questions, close and open-ended questions. It was administered in English during the researcher's English sessions so as to explain and clarify some questions. In addition to a semi-structured interview which was conducted with teachers to get an idea about their opinions on the importance of clustering as a prewriting technique in teaching writing.

7. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

7.1 Students' Questionnaire

Item1: Which skill is the most difficult for you?

Table1. Students' most difficult skill

Skills	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
a- Speaking	25	41.66
b- Listening	10	16.66
c- Reading	05	8.33
d- Writing	20	33.33
Total	60	100

As shown in table 1, the informants have most difficulty with the productive skills; speaking (41.66%) and writing (33.33%) rather than the receptive ones; listening (16.66%) and reading (8.33%). So, producing written or oral language involves learners to take into their consideration a lot of skills so

as to communicate effectively. When writing; for instance, they need to concentrate on all the aspects of writing including the accurate use of grammar, organization, a good range of vocabulary, content and mechanics.

Item 2: When writing compositions, do you go through the sequence of planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing?

Table 2. Students' following all the writing process stages

Answers	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Yes	20	33.33
No	40	66.66
Total	60	100

The results showed that forty participants do not follow the steps of the writing process. They just focus on the final product to be handed to the teacher at the end of the writing sessions. In turn, a considerable number of students (33.33%) proceed through these phases and this indicates that their teachers are aware of the great importance of this process in developing learners' writing skill.

Item 3: Do you make a plan before starting to write?

Table3. High school students' planning before starting to write

Answers	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Yes	19	31.66
No	41	68.33
Total	60	100

The majority of literary students at Zeribet El-Oued secondary schools (68.33%) do not make a plan before starting to write. Thus, their pieces of writing lack organization. While

the rest of the learners (31.66%) stated that they make a plan before starting to produce the first draft so as to reach a good writing.

Item4: Did you use to plan your writing?

a- individually   **b-** in pairs   **c-** in groups   **d-** with the help of your teacher

Table 4. Students' ways of planning their writing

Answers	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
a- individually	2	10.52
b- in pairs	4	21.05
c- in groups	3	15.78
d-with the help of your teacher	10	52.63

As demonstrated in the table above, most of the participants (52.63 %) used to plan the writing assignment by the help of their teachers. The latter guides the learners produce several ideas and facilitate the next stages of the process. (21.05 %) did the process of planning with their partners. They think in pairs and share what they know about the topic. Only (15.78 %) and (10.52 %) who get started to write in groups and individually.

Item 5: Which of the following prewriting techniques do you tend to apply mostly?

a - clustering **b-** brainstorming   **c-** questioning   **d-** listing **e-** free writing.

Table 5. Students' most used prewriting techniques

Answers	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
a-Clustering	6	31.57
b- Brainstorming	00	00
c- Questioning	4	21.05
d- Listing	2	10.52
e- Free writing	7	36.84

As noticed in table 5, students use different prewriting strategies that fit their needs and styles. Among the students who make a plan before they start writing, (36.84%) chose free writing; (31.57%) opted for clustering; (21.05%) relied on questioning; and (10.52%) rested on listing. The obtained findings showed that students differ in the techniques they use. This fact is linked to their way of thinking, cognitive abilities and styles.

Item 6: In case of using clustering, do you think that it helps you overcome your writing difficulties?

a- strongly agree   **b-** agree   **c-** disagree **d-** strongly disagree

Table 6. Students' attitudes towards clustering strategy

Answers	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
a- strongly agree	3	50
b- agree	2	33.33
c- disagree	1	16.66
d-strongly disagree	0	0

This question investigates the students' approval or disapproval for the importance of clustering as a prewriting strategy in overcoming their writing difficulties. Half of the sample strongly agreed that clustering helps them overcome their writing problems, while (33.33%) of the participants

agreed on the positive role of clustering in writing, we have only (16.66%) disagreed and none strongly disagreed. In short, it can be said that most of the students who tend to use clustering agree on its effectiveness.

Item 7: If you agree, because it helps you to:

Table 7. The help of clustering to the students

Answers	Frequencies	Percentages
a. Generate and organize the ideas	5	83.33
b. Gain more vocabulary about the writing topic.	1	16.66
c. Learn Grammar	00	00

Most of students (83.33%) said that clustering helps them generate and organize ideas, only (16.66%) answered that it helps them gain vocabulary about the writing topic. However, none said that it helps to learn grammar. This shows that clustering is very essential tool for the learners as it makes them ready to write and facilitates the coming stages of the writing process.

The discussion of the questionnaire results (question 5) helped us in answering the first research question (Are EFL students at Zeribet El-Oued secondary schools familiar with the prewriting strategy of clustering?) showing that they were not all aware of the benefits of clustering. Besides, questions (6-7) provided us an answer to the second research question (What are EFL students' perceptions of the role of clustering in improving their writing production?) revealing that only six informants had positive viewpoints on this strategy because it qualified them to gather a lot of ideas and organize them coherently and cohesively, as well as they gained a wide account of new words

and expressions. Therefore, this result confirmed the already suggested hypothesis that the prewriting strategy is presented to third year literary stream students, but it is not implemented appropriately and effectively.

7.2 Teacher's Interview

Question One: Do your students encounter difficulties at the level of writing skill ? If yes, what do you think the factors that generate these problems?

All the teachers agreed that learners face many difficulties and challenges in terms of writing skill and they provided different views about the causes behind those problems. Students' poor writing was due to the lack of practice and reading. It is clear that the more learners read the more they broaden their vocabulary, ideas and knowledge. The extensive use of language also helps them to become good writers. In addition to the complex nature of writing which involves a variety of sub skills, there are some psychological factors as the lack of motivation and interest in writing some given topics, as well as thinking in Arabic and translating from French to English which makes the texts meaningless.

Question Two: What do you usually do to overcome those problems and to improve your learners' writing achievement?

The seven EFL teachers that have been interviewed suggested various procedures to lessen the writing difficulties. They relied on reading, training, extra sessions to improve learners' writing aspects and up dated techniques as a solution to arouse their students' desire and inspiration in writing, as well as to enhance their English writing basics.

Question Three: Do you use any techniques to introduce the topic of writing and make students generate ideas? If yes, what are they? Which one do you focus mainly on your classroom? and Why?

The obtained results showed that most of the informants (four teachers) used listing, free writing, clustering and mind mapping techniques. Some of them added that they used questioning to introduce the topic of writing and make students generate ideas. Only two teachers focused on ICTs while teaching writing; especially videos that encourage students to discuss and interact with the teacher and with each other and express their reflections on these videos easily. However, the majority of the participants stated that they mainly implemented the questioning and the clustering strategies for the following reasons: First, they are so useful since they enable the students prepare themselves and generate plenty of ideas, organize them and select the most relevant ones. Second, they are suitable for the students to pave the way to draw an outline. Finally, these techniques help learners explore the relationship between the ideas, be able to have a clear image about the topic.

Question Four: What do you think of clustering as a prewriting strategy? Is it an effective way for improving the students' writing performance?

All the interviewed teachers agreed on the effectiveness of clustering in improving the students' writing performance. They stated that clustering improve some aspects of writing as organization and vocabulary. This means that clustering help reluctant students produce clearly stated ideas and fluent expressions. They use their creativity and build inter-personal thinking to keep the smooth flow of ideas. In addition to that

they acquire and develop understanding of new words and concepts, especially in group work tasks where students share ideas and compete with each other.

The discussion of the interview results (questions 3and 4) helped us in answering the third research question (What are EFL teachers' perceptions of the importance of clustering in improving students' writing performance?). Clustering is of a great importance in EFL classrooms as it helps students get ready to start writing, jot down several ideas, plan their thoughts, explore the relationship between ideas, organize them and be able to have a clear outline. Thus, clustering puts students in the right course. This finding is in line with Maula (2010) and Raya (2013) studies.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study attempted to explore third year secondary school students and their teachers' attitudes towards the role of clustering as a prewriting strategy in improving the writing performance. The results revealed that clustering plays a big role in the writing process in general and in the prewriting stage in particular; it helps learners start writing easily and overcome some writing difficulties; especially, in organization and vocabulary. In other words, clustering benefits students generate, organize ideas and collect more vocabulary about the topic. Although clustering proved to enhance learners' writing performance, they are not all aware of its significant effects on writing. In this scope, EFL teachers should pay much attention to clustering technique when presenting their lessons and students when producing their pieces of writing.

Introducing clustering strategy to improve the writing

skill is the responsibility of both teachers and students. Hence, we provide the following recommendations that could help those in future writing sessions:

1) - Prewriting techniques in general and clustering in particular should be taught as basics of writing from the early stages of English language teaching at the middle school.

2) -Teachers should train students to use clustering inside the class and ask them to perform it outside the classroom through homework assignments because this would help them create and rain out many ideas, discover the relationships among this information and narrow down broad topics. It is a funny activity that develops students' creativity, critical thinking skills and self-confidence in writing.

3) -Secondary school teachers should teach students to write using clustering explicitly and incorporate it implicitly in every lesson.

4)-Teachers should encourage students to interact and share their ideas during writing sessions as this would help them build and develop ideas for their writing task.

5)-Teachers should introduce the writing topics in group discussion that enable learners to learn from each other.

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