

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

This study attempted to investigate the effects of using pictures as prompts on English writing performance of high and low achievers in senior high school. More specifically, it was conducted to explore the effects of picture prompts on students' writing in content, organization, vocabulary and overall writing performance. In this chapter, the researcher based the conclusions largely on the major findings displayed in Chapter Four. There are four sections in this chapter. The first section refers to a summary of major findings and the discussion. In the second section, pedagogical implications are offered based on the findings. Third, the limitations of the present study are presented. At the end, recommendations for further studies are made in the hope that more relevant research might be conducted.

#### **5.1 Summary of the Results**

The current study was aimed at investigating the effects of picture prompts on the writing performance of high and low achievers. In this study both quantitative analysis and the qualitative analysis were applied. The study consisted of three sets of questionnaires, two types of narrative writing tests and interviews. With the validated classification, 108 twelfth-graders from five classes in a senior high school in Pingtung participated in this study. They were divided into two groups of high achievers (HA1 and HA2) and two groups of low achievers (LA1 and LA2). A *t*-test was conducted to find that there was no pre-existing difference in the writing ability between the two groups of high achievers and between the two groups of low

achievers. In a test context, HA1 and LA1 wrote narrative English compositions with the aid of verbal prompt (VP) while HA2 and LA2 with verbal-plus-picture prompt (VPP). The answers to the research questions were summarized as following.

The first research question was to find out whether picture prompts had the effectiveness in students' writing in terms of content. It was found that with picture prompts, both high achievers and low achievers got higher scores in content of their writing performance. Thus, the result concurred with the findings of the previous studies that picture prompts stimulated ideas, conveyed information that could be shared, and helped a writer relate to his/her own background knowledge (Stevick, 1986; Ur, 1988). However, the results indicated that picture prompts had significant effects only on high achievers' writing; picture prompts had no significant effects on the low achievers' writing. The increase in content in high achievers might be attributed to the fact that high achievers were quite capable of writing more when guided by picture prompts but low achievers were just the opposite. Even with the guidance of picture prompts, low achievers had limited ability to express their thoughts and ideas in English.

The second research question was to find out whether picture prompts had effectiveness in students' writing in terms of organization. The results showed that when writing with picture prompts, both high achievers and low achievers got higher scores in organization. The finding was in accordance with Sinatra's and Lee's. Sinatra (1986) claimed that the composition of pictures could aid in organizing the writing produced. Lee (1994) also emphasized that pictures were really helpful to her students in organizing, composing and expressing their thoughts. Nevertheless, picture prompts had significant effects only on the writing of high achievers than on that of low achievers in organization. That is, HA2 students writing with picture

prompts performed significantly better than HA1 students' writing without. On the contrary, when a comparison was made between the two groups of low achievers, no significant difference in organization was found. The result could be that the low achievers did not know how to make use of contextual clues for sentence production and to compose a coherent paragraph, so they did not get help from picture prompts in organizing their compositions.

The third research question was to find out whether picture prompts had the effectiveness in students' writing in terms of vocabulary. The mean score in vocabulary in HA2 was higher than that in HA1. However, the differences in writing with and without picture prompts did not reach a statistical significance. On the other hand, LA1 and LA2 got the same mean score in vocabulary. The difference in vocabulary scores between two groups of low achievers was not significant as well. Surprisingly, the finding did not testify White & Arndt's (1991) statement that pictures could be a powerful learning device for vocabulary enrichment. One possible explanation for this phenomenon was that not only low achievers but also high achievers in the current study did not really have sufficient vocabulary; they were only twelfth graders, not experienced writers. Therefore, they could not fully use rich vocabulary or proper words to express their ideas in English writing. That was the reason why picture prompts made no difference between two groups of high achievers and between two groups of low achievers in the category of vocabulary.

The fourth question was to find out whether picture prompts played an important role in improving the overall writing performance. Schweizer (1999) found that the ability to use pictures and to imagine in the process of story writing should help produce richer, higher quality writing. Lin (2007) also claimed that the picture prompt had the positive effect on the writers' overall writing performance. It was found in the

present study that picture prompts had significant effects on overall writing performance of high achievers but had no significant effects on that of low achievers. In overview, the findings provided relatively strong evidence that picture prompts played an important role in high achievers' writing performance. Since no significant difference was found in the categories of content, organization and vocabulary in low achievers' writing, it was not surprising that there were no effects of picture prompts on low achievers' overall writing performance.

In the analysis of Questionnaire II, meant for participants' attitude toward writing, it was apparent that high achievers enjoyed English writing more than low achievers did. High achievers were clearly more interested and more confident in English writing than low achievers was. High achievers also regarded it much easier to enrich the content of writing and to associate with relevant vocabulary than low achievers did.

In Questionnaire III, meant for the opinions of the participants in HA2 and LA2 on writing with picture prompts, it was found that both groups had positive attitudes toward writing with picture prompts in the seven questions. These questions contained in the questionnaire were upon whether providing pictures as writing prompts was beneficial to the participants in content, organization, vocabulary, and overall writing performance and writing attitude as well. There was no significant difference found. The possible reason could be that most HA2 and LA2 held a positive attitude toward picture prompts and were better motivated to write when guided by picture prompts. One LA2 student mentioned that picture prompts could provide him with a way out to "survive." While language was abstract to the low achievers, picture prompts tended to be concrete and realistic to him. That meant interpreting a picture had nothing to do with English ability so the low achievers wrote compositions with more confidence

and interest. It was convincing that using pictures solved the problem of insufficient reading ability of the student writers because picture prompts provided all relevant information in a visual form and possibly aided in the organization of that information (Baker & Quellmalz, 1979; Sinatra, 1986).

In the group interviews, most students confirmed the effectiveness of picture prompts and most of them did not think that picture prompts would stop them from getting more ideas and creativity. For example, one LA2 student disagreed that picture prompts restricted ideas and creativity. She reported that even if the same picture prompts were presented again, she would have different interpretations for the same picture; different stories would be created. In Pettersson's (1995) study, similar conclusion was drawn that the initial picture stimulus could trigger a wide variety of associations and picture interpretation varies widely according to individuals. This was also in agreement with Schwizer's (1999) conclusion that pictures could also trigger strings of associations in memory producing multiple interpretations from the same image. On the contrary, some interviewees held the opposite opinions about picture prompts. For example, one HA2 member was not fond of picture prompts at all. He considered it much easier to write a story based on his life experience than on unfamiliar picture prompts. Picture prompts limited his imagination and originality. One LA2 student also concluded that if he was not limited by the picture prompts, a different or even more interesting story would have been created. Because of the picture prompts, he had no choice but follow the boring development of the story. He depicted the same picture as the other students did and created a similar story. He thought the picture prompts restricted him from having imagination and creativity. In the studies of Pettersson (1986), the researcher mentioned that when pictures depicting concrete objects were used to elicit brief description, different participants

usually interpreted the same picture in a similar manner. Joshua (2007) held the conclusion that although pictures could provide context and background information for student writers of all ages, they might also constrain creativity. She expanded on her thought that once students developed language proficiency, pictures might hamper creativity in writing development. Sometimes, picture prompts were thought to limit imagination and creativity and thus made it impossible to develop the content. This is one of the possible defects of picture prompts. Therefore, there are pros and cons of the picture prompts.

## **5.2 Pedagogical Implications**

Children's first forms of recorded communication are drawing; it would seem to make sense to use pictures as an aid in teaching writing (Bates, 1991). Based on the findings and the students' opinions expressed in the questionnaires and the interviews, some pedagogical implications are made as follows.

First of all, the results of this study showed that picture prompts improved writing content, organization and overall writing performance of high achievers. Based on these results, it is recommended that teachers incorporate picture prompts into high achievers' English writing curricula. Pictures provide a possible way for students to become confident writers, to improve motivation and to get inspiration.

Second, it seems that picture prompts had more significant effects on high achievers than on low achievers. One possible explanation for this unexpected finding may be that high achievers already had sufficient English writing ability so they could benefit from picture prompts directly. In other words, there is a close connection between the amount of vocabulary and writing ability. Therefore, teachers need to pay more attention to equip students with more vocabulary.

Third, teachers should be mindful of the picture prompts they assign. White

(1978) stressed that single pictures generated more descriptive passages; sequences of picture generated more narratives. Hooper et al (1994) suggested that the picture should contain at least two characters, a depiction of some kind of “interesting” event and some kind of potential conflict. Hence, teachers must be careful to choose proper picture prompts for students’ writing assignments.

Fourth, in Questionnaire III and in the interviews, though most HA2 and LA2 students claimed that they got inspired and motivated to write when provided with picture prompts, still some in HA2 admitted the defects of picture prompts. That is, when language development is the goal, pictures may be helpful; but once students have developed language proficiency, picture may hinder creativity. Although in the present study picture prompts provided context and background information for student writers, some interviewees suggested that pictures might destroy their creativity. In summary, teachers should not assume that all pictures positively stimulate students in English writing. It is essential that teachers take students’ background knowledge into consideration and carefully choose the types of pictures used.

### **5.3 Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations of the current study that should be considered for future researchers.

First, this study was conducted in a senior high school in Pingtung County. The 104 participants involved in the study were divided into two groups of high achievers and two groups of low achievers. Each small group had 27 participants. The population in the research design was not large enough to be representative. Consequently, conclusions drawn in this study may not be generalized to the high school students in other parts of the country. To validate the findings of present study,

future research should engage a large number of participants in different senior high schools in different writing context.

Second, the 104 participants selected from five different classes were taught by two different English teachers. Although the two teacher used the same textbook and claimed using a balanced curriculum in teaching writing, and a *t*-test indicated that there were no significant differences in the writing ability between two groups of high achievers and between two groups of low achievers, there could still be some differences across the five classrooms with respect to the amount of time spent on writing and the explicitness of the writing instruction provided. For example, different teachers had different teaching styles. In a study of tenth graders, Mosenthal, Conley, Colella, and Davidson (1985) found that students whose teachers had a "cognitive" teaching style were more likely to produce both descriptive and narrative writing. However, in the current study, two teachers' teaching styles are not taken into account.

Third, since narratives are the most ideal genre for picture story-telling, only narrative writing tests were chosen as tests in the present study. But future researchers should be cautious when applying the results of this study conducted only on narratives to other genres.

Finally, in terms of the content of picture prompts, students' background knowledge was not taken into consideration. If the picture content is close to students' life experience, they could write better. As revealed in the interviews, some interviewees mentioned that they did not have the experience of taking a bus home alone so they had difficulty imagining the situation. But those who had had the similar experiences got inspired and imaginative to write about the topic. That is, if the topic is related to students' personal experience, inspirations come into the student writers'

minds spontaneously. On the contrary, if students do not have similar experience, it will be more difficult for them to imagine what happens in the situation of the picture prompts.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for Further Studies**

Though many studies have confirmed the effectiveness of picture prompts in students' writing performance, there is still room for improvement. This study is conducted on the effects of using pictures as prompts on high and low achievers in senior high school. It is hoped that the findings of this study can encourage further relevant studies on the relation between picture prompts and English writing. On the basis of the study findings, some suggestions for further research are given as follows.

First, different ages, groups or populations are recommended for future studies. The current study includes only 104 senior high school students, coming from the same school in Pingtung County. Due to the small number of sample students, the result might neither appropriately account for the performance of other EFL students' writing performance nor adequately be generalized to other senior high school students. For a more thorough study, a larger groups of subjects randomly sampled are suggested for the relevant research.

Second, in the current study, the participants are senior high school students who are beginning English writers. Further research will be needed on what effects picture prompts will have on experienced English writers to see if there are different effects of picture prompts.

Third, the present study is only conducted on narratives. They might be the most familiar genre for beginning English writers. However, further studies on different genres are needed to explore the effects of picture prompts on high achievers and low achievers.

Fourth, the participants' genders did not be taken into consideration. According to Davies' (1983) research, both boys and girls produce stories in which characters display sex-role stereotyping. Different genders are fond of different types of characters. For example, girls tend to write about princess and romances; instead, boys like heroes and adventures. Besides, Cleary (1996) found that girls were more inclined than boys to write to please their teachers. Future studies can focus on the influence of picture prompts on different genders.

Fifth, future studies should lead us to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the content of picture prompts and life experience. Further studies are recommended to investigate if imagination or life experience plays an important role in writing. It will be interesting to find out whether prior background knowledge plays a role in interpreting pictures.