

Use of Hot Potatoes to Improve Effective Paragraph Writing

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This research report is the result of my own work and includes nothing that was done in collaboration with others.

(Signature)

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Abstract

This project, studies the impact of Hot Potatoes activities in the improvement of fourth grade students' writing by identifying and learning the rhetorical structure of a paragraph in English and how it will help them to write paragraphs in an effectively. The aim is to know if the use of this technological tool helps learners to be aware of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph and if this knowledge improves their paragraph writing. The data analysis shows that Hot Potatoes samples could provide students with activities to learn and reinforce the rhetorical structure but learners evidence very little improvement because they learned how to begin a paragraph but they do not take the whole rhetorical structure into account.

Keywords: writing skills, narrative paragraphs, rhetorical structure, and Hot Potatoes activities.

Resumen

Este proyecto estudia el impacto de las actividades de Hot Potatoes en el mejoramiento de la escritura en cuarto grado, mediante la identificación y aprendizaje de la estructura retórica de párrafos en inglés y cómo esto ayudará a los estudiantes a escribir párrafos adecuadamente. El objetivo es conocer si esta herramienta tecnológica les ayuda a comprender la estructura de un párrafo y mejora su escritura. Los datos analizados muestran que las actividades Hot Potatoes pueden proveer a los estudiantes con actividades que les ayuden a aprender o reforzar la estructura de párrafo pero la evidencia es de un mínimo de mejoramiento porque los estudiantes solo aprendieron a iniciar un párrafo sin tener en cuenta todas las partes.

Palabras claves: habilidad escrita, párrafos narrativos, estructura retórica y actividades Hot Potatoes.

Introduction

Statement of the problem

Learning a language can take place for different reasons, from studying to communicating, working in another country, or traveling. However, learning a language implies different aspects such as learning the pronunciation, building up vocabulary, learning words in context from written and spoken materials, being familiar with the grammar, and constructing sentences, phrases, paragraphs and essays. In other words, learning a language involves the development of speaking, reading, listening and writing skills. Although all the skills are necessary to acquire and develop the language, knowing how to express ideas in a written way is an essential need in my context, since the pupils are required to write in all the courses. Bearing this in mind, this study works on the writing skill.

Writing involves thinking about what you want to say and how to put those ideas and thoughts in words. However, writing needs to be taught, taking into account the students' needs and ages. One of the first stages that learners need to accomplish is to learn how to write a paragraph. A paragraph is very important because if it is well structured and organized the reader can understand the content and the learners make their writing more attractive. Being able to write a well-structured paragraph could encourage learners through the process of writing. For this reason, pupils need to learn the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, which is a way of supporting and improving their writing skills. Additionally, students need to organize their views and learn to communicate their thoughts and ideas clearly in writing by using different parts that must be taken into

account when writing a paragraph. Those parts make up the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

The students from Gimnasio Iragua have shown difficulties in their written production. When I started working with this group, I observed that they did not know when they had to use the rhetorical structure of a paragraph because they did not recognize that as writers a paragraph could become a major component of their style. Although they possessed a great amount of vocabulary, they were not confident about how to use it or put in order the information into paragraphs; that is, using grammar appropriately and writing the topic sentences, details and closing sentences coherently and cohesively. To encourage this group of pupils to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, it was important to help them identify topic sentence and relevant information, find appropriate details and closing sentence and give relevant examples in an endeavor to develop well-structured paragraphs. I decided to carry out this project to improve the students' paragraph writing by implementing the use of Hot Potatoes program.

The study was planned to be carried out during six weeks to facilitate the analysis of the difficulties learners had when using the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, when producing their writing and also how to overcome those difficulties to help them to improve their writing skill. Consequently, those aspects were analyzed in order to find an answer to the following question:

Research question:

To what extent will the application of Hot Potatoes activities help fourth graders to improve the rhetorical structure of a narrative paragraph in English in order to improve their writing skills?

General Objective:

To find out which Hot Potatoes activities are relevant and help students to use the rhetorical structure of paragraph when writing.

Specific objectives:

1. To identify if the Hot Potatoes activities allow learners to improve paragraph writing.
2. To find out if the Hot Potatoes activities motivate the students to write.

Rationale

One of the aims of Gimnasio Iragua's curriculum is that teaching writing has to get students to acquire the abilities and skills they need to produce a range of different kinds of written texts. Writing must occur daily and in order to see improvement, students it is necessary to give the students many opportunities to practice. Although writing is an important skill in the school and the writing process is taught from elementary levels, this project was conceived as an additional component of the fourth grade program with the purpose of providing students with a useful tool that allows them to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph by using technology. Indeed, this action research project focuses on the implementation of ICTs in the learning environments to observe if the use of Hot Potatoes program helps the students to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

According to Imperial College London (2008), ICTs provide a range of services, which enhance teaching and research. ICTs are used to benefit and provide opportunities to boost the learning process. ICTs are tools that provide not only teachers but also parents and students with different opportunities to enjoy, have fun, practice, review and learn different topics. One of the ICTs tools is Hot Potatoes. The program was created at University of Victoria CALL Laboratory Research to back up teachers in order to create interactive online activities that are accessible for students where Internet works. It contains a set of six technological tools that allow students to be in touch with technology and learning. As these six tools allow teachers to create activities according to the students' needs, level and ages, they may be a useful strategy to implement in the lesson in order to

help students to identify the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. Students can make their writing successful by following specific steps to accomplish their writing tasks and applying the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

After having identified the students' weakness and establishing the ways of improvement, I consider that the findings could benefit teachers and students. Fourth grade students might benefit from this project because they could improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, feel comfortable when writing and enjoy learning to write paragraphs by using technology. According to Wiggle (2002) learners can understand what the steps to write paragraphs are, be aware of the importance of writing in an organized way to make readers understand their writing and comprehend that nowadays technology has a very important role in the learning process when they are required to write paragraphs. Similarly, teachers will benefit because they can help their pupils to improve their writing process by implementing and adjusting the project according to their students' needs. In Harmer's (2007) words, "teachers need to help students build up the writing habit so that they recognize writing as being a normal part of classroom practice and they come to writing task with as much enthusiasm as they do other activities".

Designing this project involved four steps: Initially it was necessary to create the online activities by designing the Hot Potatoes samples taking into account the students' needs. The activities contained words and phrases that allowed the students to learn and reinforce the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. Secondly, it was necessary to find the space to work during language classes to use the technological tool, so language classes were adapted according to computers' lab availability. Thirdly, the students

received the explanation of the objectives of the study. Then the teacher from the subject called Cultural Studies received an explanation of the methodology the students were going to have in order to carry out the project and she was asked to contribute to the study by answering pre and post questionnaires and collecting her students' writing samples in her class. Lastly, the students received a training session in which Hot Potatoes activities was explained to them, and then they worked with this tool and learned the way in which they had to carry out the activities with the Hot Potatoes program.

Theoretical framework

In order to guarantee coherence between the theories and concepts, the theoretical foundations for the current study focus on the following issues: writing, paragraph, rhetorical structure of a paragraph, ICT and writing, and the use of Hot Potatoes software in language teaching.

To begin with, it is important to get a broad view of what writing implies in this project. Writing is a skill that needs to be developed and guided at home and in the school and has to take into account the students' needs and level, and also the new methodologies, strategies and technology. Teachers have the responsibility to make students go around their thoughts and ideas in order to help them to develop their own writing by providing pupils with samples, in which they can use appropriate steps and structures when writing. Emig (1980) cited by Zamel (1982) and Shaughnessy (1997) claim that writing is the challenge students have in order to discover what they want to express or say and the process they have to do to develop, expand and define an idea.

Perl (1980) cited by Zamel (1982) argues that when learners write regarding their own experiences or ideas the writing is more effective than when they have to write following a specific objective. In other words, students can write better if they are encouraged to do it freely and at the same time they are motivated. In addition, students can develop, practice and become good writers if they are provided with basic and specific steps and structures that allow them to communicate their ideas and thoughts clearly. Those steps and structures can challenge and make them feel sure when writing.

Furthermore, if the students are guided and provided with writing “levels” such as sentences, phrases, paragraphs etc., in which students can begin to organize their ideas, their writing will be successful.

Moving forward to another construct, Scott (2008) argues that a paragraph is an element that allows to develop a single idea and that it is a group of sentences that are related among them, in which a thought can be expressed, defined and developed in a coherent way. In addition, a paragraph should be well structured and completed because it is like a good essay. Similarly, Kemper, Sebrant and Meyer (2005) argue that students can get control of their own writing if they are able to learn how to write a good paragraph. Students should learn that a paragraph is the basis for all their writings and if the paragraphs have an appropriate structure, they are strong and well organized, the learners can become good writers because they will be able to create successful essays, book reviews and reports.

Additionally, Walters (2000) claims that the “fundamental unit of composition is the paragraph”. It consists of different sentences that are grouped together. Moreover, Fulwiler and Hayakawa (2008) state that a paragraph must contain unity, internal organization, and coherence, it has to be written to develop a main idea and it is used to state a new idea and they make writing easy to read. Paragraphs are used to help the readers follow the logic of the argument. Although there are several kinds of paragraphs, they conserve the basic structure. Students must learn that in short or long writing each paragraph has a structure that orders the ideas and makes the whole writing flow. In general, a paragraph is mainly used to separate main ideas. It has a simple structure. When

writing a paragraph is necessary to keep the coherence in order to make the reader understand what the paragraph is about.

When talking about paragraphs it is important to mention that there are different types of paragraphs. However, the one that concerns this study and which students are going to work with is the narrative paragraph. A narrative paragraph is used to write stories about something that happened, in which it is possible to use informal language and lack of descriptive analysis. A narrative paragraph can contain a general idea in one sentence, four or five supporting details, which expand the idea, and a sentence that concludes the paragraph.

Nevertheless, a good paragraph needs a rhetorical structure in order to make it understandable. Therefore, the next construct is the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. According to Cohan (1976), it is necessary to explain and clarify to the students the meaning of elements that are needed when they have to write a paragraph because it makes them to have a whole picture of the writing required and it allows them to obtain good results when writing. Furthermore, Cohan (1976) mentions that it is required to give the students concrete and structured guidelines that offer them the meaning of the paragraph elements. Additionally, Walter (2000) mentions that the rhetorical structure of a paragraph must contain three parts: topic sentence, body sentences, and concluding sentence.

Sarada (2003), states that the rhetorical structure of a paragraph is fundamental when writing stories or essays and it is not only a group of words combined among them. Each paragraph has to have its own structure, mention the principal idea, a group of sentences that develop it and a conclusion. In other words, the rhetorical structure of a

paragraph constitutes the foundations for writing paragraphs, essays and narratives and it is used to develop ideas with a logical sequence.

To sum up, teachers must be clear when teaching the rhetorical structure of a paragraph because in this way students can acquire the concepts of each component of the paragraph easily and follow parameters to accomplish their objectives and tasks when writing. The rhetorical structure of a paragraph for this study is a topic sentence, 3 or 4 supporting details and closing or concluding sentence. This structure will allow students to have the procedure and steps in mind when writing their paragraphs.

Hence, it is important to keep in mind how the students are going to improve their rhetorical structure of a paragraph. The use of ICTs can be useful to reinforce the students' knowledge of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph since nowadays ICTs are considered as an educational tool that can help students develop their skills. According to Cox & Webb (2004) cited by Haydn & Counsell (2003) ICTs make classroom management easier because the teachers can create interesting activities and meaningful materials that should increase the pupils' motivation. Additionally (p. 42) the author mentions that ICTs have several roles in teaching because they can help teachers to make lessons more interesting and meaningful, they allow teachers to explain topics more clearly and encourage them to vary the class organization. Additionally, Loveless (2003), mentions that it is appealing for children to use ICTs when teaching them to write because ICTs are useful tools, they encourage students to develop their skills, and learners can become real writers through the implementation of one of these tools in the classroom.

The use of ICTs in the classroom requires that teachers analyze what are the best tools for their learners and how they could be implemented in the classroom to anticipate

difficulties when using those tools in lessons. Moreover, teachers need to identify the students' needs and interests in order to get better results when using ICTs. Indeed, teachers have to provide students with ICTs tools that motivate students and make their writing successful.

Regarding the need of fulfilling the necessities of improving writing skills, this study integrates technology to the teaching of writing when dealing with the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. Technology encourages pupils to find ways of developing the rhetorical structure of a paragraph even when they are not aware of their lack of language. Furthermore, the use of technological resources promotes the use of several resources to interact using the second language. The use ICTs has become a need since it allows people to communicate with the world. In addition, it facilitates human interaction and allows students and teachers to expand and learn about different resources they have to employ for teaching and learning. According to Brown (1994), working in terms of teaching and learning with computers facilitates the social interaction and organization of the classroom rather than inhibit learning.

It should so far be clear that working with technology offers several benefits for teachers and students since they can work in a collaborative way and use it to facilitate learning and teaching. Although technology can never replace teachers' traditional teaching styles, strategies, methods and techniques, it could be used as a complement to improve writing. Indeed, having good writing skills can be possible by implementing technology in the classroom. Learning to write well takes time and needs practice and support. For that reason, the use of technology is a useful strategy in this study since it may help the pupils to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. Based on my experience,

technology should become part of the lessons and teachers must make it part of their professional lives and use it to improve learning. In short, the use of technology for improving certain aspects of the language has come to play an important role in education.

Taking the learners' needs when using technology into account it can be mentioned that they do not only need physical resources but also human ones that allow them to interact and make the use of technology in classroom successful. According to Brown (1994), collaborative work in the acquisition of a foreign language can be effected by using the new didactic applications of computer equipments and programs. In other words, technology in the classroom supports students' learning process and increases collaborative work since students and teachers have to interact in the classroom to carry out activities that involve the use of technology.

Going back to the issue, it is indispensable to take into account the students' age and interests to improve their rhetorical structure of a paragraph, and technology offers programs according to the learners' needs that can engage and encourage them to use this tool in several ways, sharing and discovering their own leaning. Crook (1994) claims that working with computers in terms of teaching and learning can facilitate collaborative work and learning in the classroom. Teachers use technology as a tool to get students to communicate in the target language and to put them in contact with authentic content. Technology is a tool that provides teachers and students not only with opportunities to enjoy and have fun but also with activities to practice, reinforce, review and learn about several aspects of the language. Nowadays, teachers and instructors have different ways of helping students to improve their skills. Technological tools allow teachers to create

learner- computer interaction in order to provide learners with vocabulary, comprehension assessment or grammar.

One of the technological tools that allow students to be in touch with technology and learning is Hot Potatoes. Hot Potatoes is a program that was created to back up teachers since it allows them to create interactive online activities that are accessible for students where Internet works. In the words of Dudeney (2008), “Hot Potatoes use should be an integral part of the teaching and learning process and not a discrete activity to be undertaken in isolation of the rest of the learning. Teachers can better prepare the students for the kinds of international cross- cultural interactions which are increasingly required for success in academic, vocational or personal life”. Hot Potatoes program has the power and flexibility of being a tool that allows creating and providing students with feedback immediately (Uschi, 2003).

The program allows the design of six different online activities: JBC, JQuiz, JMix, JCross, JCloze, and JMatch. These activities have specific characteristics that can be adapted according to the students’ age, level, needs and interests. As stated by MacGregor and Winke, (2001) the use of this kind of technology in the classroom has many benefits, mainly the amount of time students are exposed to the language. McGregor and Winke (2001), argue that the aim of using Hot Potatoes is to create different exercises that let students work on their way towards accurate answers based on the feedback provided by teachers. The value of Hot Potatoes depends on the knowledge and creativity of the user and how it is guided. Although Hot Potatoes activities have only been applied for creating language tests (MacGregor and Winki. 2001), it is being widely used for a variety of applications in the classroom to improve different aspects related to language learning such

as improving vocabulary, grammar or in this study to help learners to improve their rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

Kisby (2006) argues, “The Hot Potatoes activities proved to be a great success, but it is clear that some basic principles have to be respected if students are to remain motivated”. Students need to know how to use the minimal concepts about technology in order to be involved in different tasks related to the use of technology such as Hot Potatoes.

This tool can provide assistance in the improvement of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph because it can be used to create different activities such as matching sentences or words, filling gaps or mixed sentences about different topics. Also, it gives many options that allow teachers to be creative.

According to Kassen, Wahba, Zeinab & Taha (2006, p. 284) the interactive materials created with Hot Potatoes is an additional resource that contributes to the development of learners language ability, determine their own learning and encourages them to be aware of their learning process.

On the other hand, Kwary and Arnos (2006) who researched about creating comprehension quizzes and crosswords with Hot Potatoes suggested that this online material can be created by anyone, although with a basic knowledge of computer language. Thus, teachers can use this tool to design activities that assess the students or reinforce their knowledge. Additionally, they also claim that “The computer program Hot Potatoes is one of several programs which make the tasks of creating e-learning materials an easy one and that this program “has been proven user-friendly and can be used by any teacher, even with very little computer skills

According to Universitat de València (2001) Hot Potatoes does not require any knowledge of HTML. It is a very useful program because it offers a variety of exercise templates such as multiple choice, gap-filling, crossword and jumbled sentences which are easy to use.

The constructs presented previously are the theoretical foundations that will support this action research project. Based on the former findings and considerations, it is the writer's view that each construct of this literature review will be a complement to help the students to develop their rhetorical structure of a paragraph. In this study, the rhetorical structure of a paragraph and the use of Hot Potatoes can be very closely related and complement each other. Additionally once students initiate to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, it is expected that they will be motivated to become better writers and use technology as a tool to overcome difficulties in their learning.

To conclude, the rhetorical structure of a paragraph must be conceived as part of the development of the writing skill and students should be provided with several activities that facilitate them to practice the rhetorical structure of a paragraph to communicate their ideas, thoughts and opinions in a coherent way.

State of the Art

Despite the fact that there is little evidence of researchers who have investigated about the use of Hot Potatoes tool to help students or learners to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, Kisby(2006), Honzátko(2006), and Schanding (2001) have carried out studies that have implemented Hot Potatoes to support, improve and help students in their language learning.

Kisby (2006), who carried out his project with young learners in Czech Republic analyzed the effect of using CALL to enhance pupil's motivation and examined whether the use of ICTs allows learners to improve their language performance. Kisby (2006) worked with a set of exercises by using Hot Potatoes in order to revise and refresh grammar structure, vocabulary and topics of units 1 to 6 of "Open Doors 1." For Kisby, Hot Potatoes allowed pupils to enjoy working with this material since if they made mistakes they could repeat the exercise. In addition, the author states that Hot Potatoes is relevant since students learned.

Honzátko (2006) researched about the importance of using the computer in second language teaching and wanted to demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of teaching in a language lab and teaching in a common classroom equipped with a computer and a projector, both forms language lab and classroom with computer by using Hot Potatoes activities. They were used as content of the lessons and based on the New Headway Pre-Intermediate unit 12 and Intermediate unit 4. For Honzátko (2006) Hot Potatoes is a tool that students appreciate since there is a variety of activities that can be chosen by the students. Additionally these activities can be used as part of the lesson.

Another work that the author found to be useful as support for this project is the one done by Schanding (2001) who designed Internet-based materials at Georgia State University (GSU) in order for students to enroll in GSU's Intensive English Program. Also, the Hot Potatoes activities were designed for students who were attending to the university's English program. The researcher wanted to help the students to develop their organization, development and accuracy in academic paper writing by creating activities

that allowed students to focus on certain grammar aspects. For Schanding, Hot Potatoes provide opportunities for learners to notice and correct errors.

Although the findings in the three studies mentioned before did not refer specifically to Hot Potatoes activities to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, they highlight important aspects related to the use of this tool to help the students to improve their language, organization, development and accuracy in academic paper writing of papers and content. For that reason, I considered that the Hot Potatoes program could be used for the purpose of this study since it provides support to understand the process my students experience when using the rhetorical structure of a paragraph in their writing.

Research Design

The focus of this study was to find a solution to a problem I found when students used the rhetorical structure of a paragraph for writing. The traditional method for teaching writing has not encouraged students to be motivated and become better writers.

Type of study

Given that the this study was carried out in order to help pupils to improve the use of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, I decided to use the action research methodology to find out whether the use of Hot Potatoes could help learners to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph in English and consequently improve their writing skills .

Action research is classroom-based research that is conducted by a teacher in order to reflect, change, increase efficacy and help the learners progress in their learning. My point of view is in agreement with Ferrance (2000), who asserts that action research is “a reflective process that allows for inquiry and discussion” and Stringer (2007) who states that action research aims at creating knowledge, suggesting and applying changes, and it modifies practice and performance. Consequently, the focus of attention in this study is to develop a process that allows me to identify the problem, gather and analyze data in order to reflect on that process with the purpose of creating different strategies or action plans to solve the classroom situation. Those steps were followed in order to gather, analyze and report data and state future action, as is shown in the following diagram.

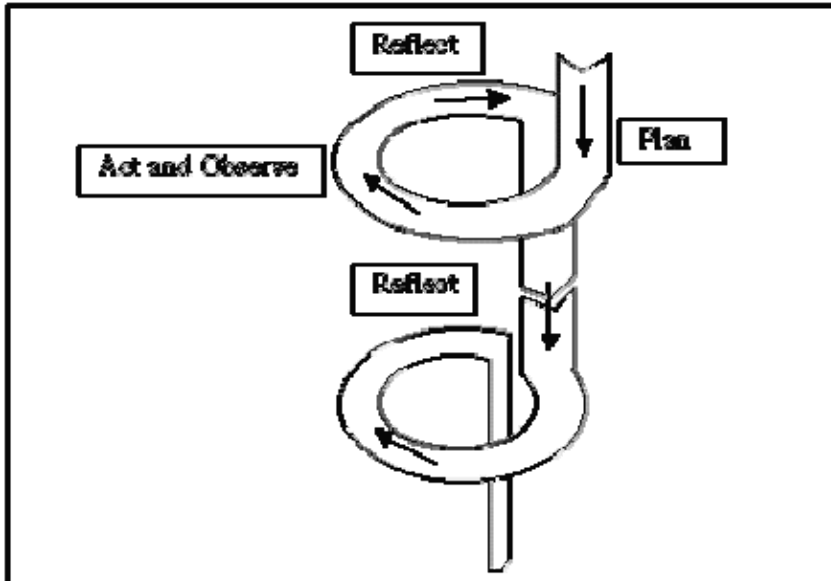


Figure 1 Action Research Cycle

Retrieved, Nov.10, 2009 from <http://www.iier.org.au/qjer/qjer14/howden1.gif>

Researcher's role

According to Freeman (1998), teachers have to find ways and activities that allow them to discover, take risks and explore unknown situations that can appear during their teaching process. Brooks, cited by Freeman (Idem) claims that teachers have to have in mind both their daily work and attitude in order to be able to identify the problems in the classroom. In other words, teachers should question themselves to identify what are the things they know about the students and find out different techniques or strategies that allow teachers to differentiate the normal class and the behavior or difficulties that require observation and action. Since the teacher's primary goal is to teach and any research project must not obstruct with or interrupt this commitment, my role during this action research study was primarily teacher-observer-participant.

I determined the role to play to ensure facilitation of this action research project and approval by the students in their class (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). My role as observer

was to reflect on my own practice and teaching, keep field notes and reflections, and record the group interaction and behavior using qualitative tools, being careful to avoid subjectivity, by assuming the role of participant-observer.

The role of participant in my study, allowed me to interact with pupils and make sense of the Hot Potatoes activities. Participating in the study and in the students' learning process provided me with additional information related to how students were engaged in the Hot Potatoes activities.

School Context

This action research project was designed for the fourth graders students at Gimnasio Iragua in Bogotá, Colombia. Gimnasio Iragua is a private and catholic female school which is affiliated with the International Baccalaureate Organization (IB) and is in the process of becoming a bilingual school. The IB offers high quality programs of international education to the worldwide community of schools. At Iragua, students are expected to have an excellent English level.

The school has classrooms, laboratories, a computer room and a coliseum, all complying with technical and architectural requirements for students to achieve the best possible learning experience, following the standards set by the Ministry of Education in terms of spaces, lightning, acoustics and furniture which help students to have comfort and better concentration in their learning activities. These spaces are complemented with sport courts, fields and parks.

Participants

The participants involved in this project are a specific group of twenty-four fourth grade female students whose ages range between nine and ten. They are studying science, math and cultural studies in English this year. Based on a test taken at the beginning of the year, and on the contents of the course syllabus, they are estimated to be at an elementary level of English.

They take seven hours a week of English classes and have studied English for three years. They follow instructions, listen to audio texts and follow up conversations. Their reading skills are quite good. Since they are in the process of learning a foreign language, they need reinforcement of their writing skills and of their use of grammar structures. They also need to broaden their vocabulary repertoire. In addition, they need to work on text organization so that they can compose coherent paragraphs. According to a survey applied at the beginning of the year, most of them like activities that involve movement and group activities for learning. They enjoy working in pairs, role-playing stories, listening to songs, making posters, presenting speeches and playing games.

Data collection instruments

The instruments used for this action research project included a pre-writing test, a post-writing test, a pre-questionnaire, a post questionnaire, students' documents which contained students' writing work from English and Cultural Studies subjects, a blog, Hot Potatoes samples and the teacher's field notes.

The pre-writing test and the post-writing test were administered and scored in a consistent way by using a rubric. Both tests were given with the purpose of scoring them

and making the study relevant and valid. The tests were composed of an instruction in which students had to write a free topic paragraph. In order to score the tests, rubrics were used to analyze the improvement when using the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

Questionnaires

According to Walonick (1993) questionnaires are one of the most popular methods of conducting research in the academic field. They provide a convenient way of gathering information from a target population and they are easy to analyze. Additionally, they are familiar to students and they do not make students anxious. The pre-questionnaire and the post-questionnaire were used to collect data about the students' knowledge in terms of questioning them about kinds of paragraphs, about use of rhetorical structure of a paragraph and their feelings when using Hot Potatoes.

Students' documents

They are a set of documents produced intentionally for certain purpose. (Burns, 1999) refers to the documents as a readily accessible source of data. They can be examined and provide researchers with a profile of the classroom. Freeman (1998) calls this procedure "*document collection*" which consists in several documents of the research situation like course overviews, lessons plans, students' writing, classroom materials etc... In this study, the documents used were what I called *students' writing work* from English and Cultural Studies classes. These documents were used to verify the students' progress when using the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. They were four in total.

Field notes

Burns (1999), describes field notes as a written account of the events when they are taking place and include any relevant aspect of teaching and learning. To register this data I wrote notes and designed a chart with the students' name and their scores in each Hot Potatoes activity. Unfortunately, the data from the scores' activities were useless during the data analysis procedure due to the fact the students who obtained a low score closed the activity and began to do it again, so the real score was not recorded.

Blog Diary

Jimenez (1996) considers that a diary is the teacher's own description of the events in which s/he is interested. It is a personal journal designed to post reflections in a chronological order about the observation done during a research process. In other words, they are personal books used for making comments, sharing and registering information related to different or specific topics. In this study, I kept a blog on the Internet. I recorded the main events and situations that occurred during each session.

Rubrics

According to Moskal (2000) rubrics are "descriptive schemes that are developed by teachers or evaluators to guide the analysis or processes of student's efforts". Nowadays rubrics are used in schools to evaluate different activities, make a judgment related to students' quality of work, and provide students with parameters in order to assess them on a specific category of language. Gimnasio Iragua has a scoring scale from 1 to 7 and there are not rubrics. For that reason, I adapted rubrics for the study regarding the following categories: Ideas, Organization, word choice and conventions (Kemper D, Sebranek P. and Meyer V. (2005). (See appendix 1).

Hot Potatoes

They are a set of six tools to create interactive online exercises and they are useful to create educational activities. I used this tool to know to what extent students reinforce and improve their rhetorical structure of a paragraph when writing.

Data collection procedure

The data collection procedure was implemented during six weeks in April and May of 2009, in order to find out if the use of Hot potatoes contributes to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. The procedure took three phases. the pre, while and post stages.

In the pre stage, the first action I took was to apply questionnaires for teachers and students, and then the students took a pre- writing test in order to find out about their knowledge of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, their motivation when writing and the preferences when using the Hot Potatoes samples. After that, learners worked on a training session to explain to them the mechanics of the Hot Potatoes samples and finally the students' parents received a consent letter.

In the while-stage, the Hot Potatoes activities were implemented. After finishing the Hot Potatoes activities, the students wrote paragraphs taking into account their rhetorical structure. I assessed the students' paragraphs by using the rubrics. I focused on the item related to organization in order to analyze if the Hot Potatoes activities were useful to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. Additionally, I collected the student's writing activities from cultural studies class to compare how the students had written their paragraphs.

Finally, *in the post stage* I applied a post -test in which the participants wrote a paragraph by themselves in order to compare the students' performance in the pre test to their final results. Then the students answered a final questionnaire to be compared to the

first one and to state their motivation when writing. In the same way, the Cultural Studies teacher was asked to answer the post questionnaire that asked her point of view about the project and what the learners had learned from it.

Pedagogical Intervention and Implementation

This chapter explains the action plan designed and implemented in order to answer the research question. It explains the pre, while and post stages, to make sense of how the intervention was carried out.

Pre- intervention

During the *pre-intervention* I designed activities to diagnose, corroborate the problem and design instruments to keep track of the whole problem. The first one was to ask students to write a paragraph (from 5 to seven lines) about a free topic taking into account a set of rubrics (see appendix 1) previously given by the teachers and adapted according to students' age and language level to check their awareness of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. The second one was to answer a questionnaire (see appendix 2), which was completed in the classroom in order to collect the students' impressions regarding their knowledge and likes about writing. After that, the students took a training session in the computer lab to familiarize them with the procedure to work with the Hot Potatoes samples and with the types of activities they were going to do. The fourth activity consisted in sending by mail a questionnaire regarding the Science and Cultural Studies subject, to gather the teachers' opinions about how the students write a paragraph. Finally, the students' parents received a consent letter by mail in order to follow the ethical consideration (see appendix 4).

While intervention

The pedagogical intervention sessions were carried out in the computer lab once a week. These consisted in developing activities by means of the online software Hot Potatoes. All of the activities related to the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. The time estimated for each activity was 15 minutes to work on the computer and 25 minutes to write a paragraph regarding the rhetorical structure of a paragraph provided by the Hot Potatoes. The learners worked with 5 sets of Hot potatoes activities (see appendix 5) that were designed taking into account the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. These activities were included in fourth grade program as part of the written activities students have to do once a week (see appendix 6).

In the *first activity* the students matched the items in the right column to the items on the left by using synonyms; the aim was to provide the students with vocabulary related to paragraph structure; then students had to write a paragraph using the words given in the Hot Potatoes activity. *The second activity* consisted in filling in gaps, in which students had to complete a paragraph by writing missing words in order to learn about the paragraph organization. Then students wrote sentences to expand and close the paragraphs worked on the Hot Potatoes activity. *The third activity* was to complete a crossword puzzle; this activity aimed at learning about the specific elements of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. After working on this activity, the students had to organize a paragraph written on the subject cultural studies. This aimed to reinforce the parts of a paragraph. *The fourth activity* was to take a quiz; it aimed at identifying the meaning of each one of the parts of the paragraph. After that, the students wrote a

paragraph about their families regarding the parts presented in the quiz. *The last activity* was mixed-up sentences and it aimed at organizing a paragraph and writing the final sentence of the story or a different ending.

In order to keep track of this session I designed a blog (available at <http://mayienjoyslearning.blogspot.com/>), (see appendix 7). It was essential to write the reflections notes and record the development of the activities while students were doing each one of them in the computer lab.

Post Intervention

The *post intervention* consisted in writing a free-topic paragraph (see appendix 8). The students wrote a paragraph taking into account the parts of a paragraph learned during the while intervention. This paragraph was corrected using the rubrics. Moreover, the students answered a post-questionnaire (see appendix 9) aimed to verify the student's progress in their knowledge of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

The description of these stages gave me a clear idea of how action research is a reflective and a cyclic process. Additionally, the activities were carried out the way they were designed with few alterations of the schedule. There were not main difficulties which interfered with the project program. The school provided the necessary support, the facilities and the resources to develop the activities. I designed a chart in which the schedule followed in order to implement the pedagogical intervention is evident (see appendix 12).

Data Analysis

In this chapter I will describe the data analysis conducted to answer the research question, “To what extent will the application of Hot Potatoes activities help fourth graders to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph in English in order to improve their writing skills?” To accomplish the research question and analyze the data first I will describe the approaches followed, then I will explain the process of coding and categorization and after that, I will analyze each one of the categories that results from the analysis and finally, I will validate the process of data analysis.

In order to analyze the data collected in this study I followed the qualitative approach because it allows that the researcher uses interviews, videos, documents, diaries and other sources as a way of providing consistent evidence. I also used triangulation to obtain different types of data on the same problem Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Regarding the qualitative analysis, I used a “Grounded Approach” suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) which analyzes the data from a qualitative point of view. They suggest that data collected should be coded and then organized into groups that have similar concepts or characteristics and then those characteristics become categories that are the basis for the construction of a theory. Burns (1999) made an interpretation of the grounded theory and suggested five steps in order to make the results consistent. They are: assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretation and reporting the outcomes.

At the first stage *assembling the data*, Burns (1999) suggests that it is always important to keep in mind the research question to verify how the data attempt to answer it. Bearing this in mind, I put together all the instruments, and then I organized all the instruments regarding the

pre-stage, while-stage and post-stage in order to have an overall view of them. I divided the instruments according to the order of the activities, I made list of the patterns that appeared as I was doing the process and made a list of them according to the most relevant ones. The initial patterns referred to motivation, use of ICTs, writing a topic sentence, paragraph structure, understanding of rhetorical structure of a paragraph, writing with Hot Potatoes tool and without Hot Potatoes tool. Finally, I started reflecting in more detail which patterns could be included in the preliminary ones.

During the stage *coding the data* Burns suggests to create or generate codes and categories with the purpose of identifying main patterns. In order to create the categories, she advises to follow a “content analysis” which means to examine the meanings contained in the data in order to illustrate words, phrases or specific themes. In other words, the objective of this stage is to concentrate the data with the aim of making it easier to find the way of achieving relevant interpretations. Burns proposes to classify the codes that appear under categories which can be words, events, patterns of behavior or phrases noticed while collecting the data.

After analyzing all the instruments, I wrote each one in a piece of paper in order to differentiate them and I began to analyze the patterns and reflect about how these patterns could answer the research question. I obtained twelve patterns and in order to find the categories I designed a chart with each instrument and the pattern.

In the *comparing data* stage, Burns recommends to compare all the patterns if they are repeated on the different instruments. The aim of this stage is to identify “hierarchies” or “sequences” and recognize relations between the instruments released by the data.

As mentioned previously, I designed a chart to record the frequency of the patterns in the instruments. Based on that information, I compared the patterns in order to know to what extent

they could give an answer to the research question. After that, I sized up the initial patterns and I began to put away the ones which could not help me to solve the research question or were not representative for the study. Finally, I labeled the data under categories. After examining this process, I realized that I could frame the patterns into two main categories, each of which had some subcategories. The categorization is illustrated in the following chart.

Research Question	Main categories	Subcategories
To what extent will the application of Hot Potatoes activities help fourth graders to improve the rhetorical structure of a narrative paragraph in English in order to improve their writing skills?	Writing aspects	Evidence of understanding the first part of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph: topic sentence.
		Evidence of paragraph organization.
	Use of technology	Evidence of Motivation
		Evidence of awareness when writing paragraphs in other subjects.

Chart 1: Coding the data

In the next stage *building interpretations*, Burns proposes to make sense of the information organized in the categories and subcategories form previous stage. In this part, it is important to use strategies in order to integrate the ideas and facilitate the explanation regarding the patterns established before.

The interpretation was made taking into account second language teaching and learning theories enclosed in the literature review of this study.

Main category: Writing aspects

This category comes out from the main objective of this study which is helping fourth grade students improve their writing skill, especially what has to do with the rhetorical structure

of a paragraph. The subcategories that emerged from this category are: evidence of understanding of one part of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph: topic sentences, and evidence of paragraph organization. The following is the analysis I made of these categories and subcategories.

Subcategory 1: Evidence of awareness of the “topic sentence” as the first component of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.

One of the most frequently repeated patterns in the data collection instruments was the writing of the *topic sentence*. It is present in all the activities, particularly in the while stage. Similarly, it appears in the samples collected from the cultural studies class.

“I enjoy doing paragraphs” “Do you want to write an excellent paragraph?” “If you don’t know how to do a paragraph I am going to explain to you”. “My favorite animal is the butterfly because of three reasons”. “My family is very big and united”. “The giant panda is so soft and cute”.

Excerpt 1. Students’ samples of topic sentence.

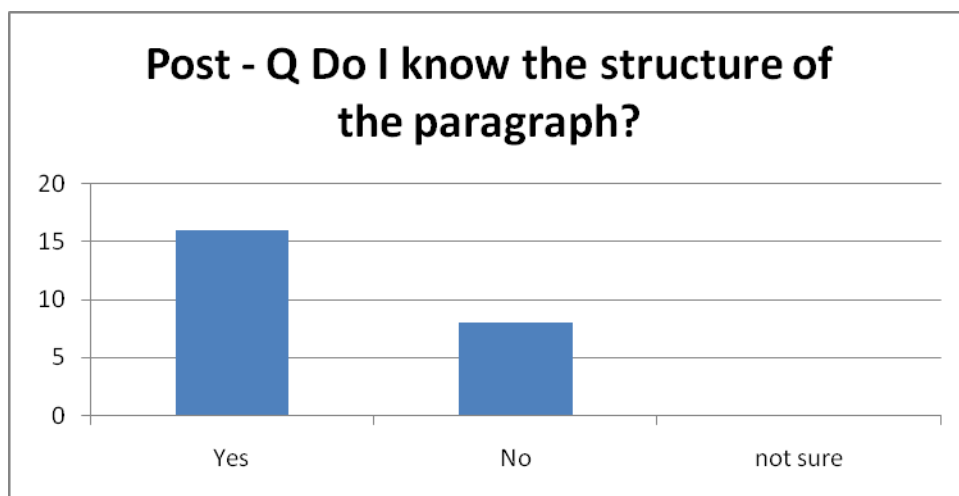
According to Cohan (1976) it is required to give to the students’ concrete and structured guidelines that offer them the meaning of the paragraph elements. During the development of the writing activities, learners intended to follow the rhetorical structure of a paragraph and wrote the topic sentence to begin their paragraphs. This claim is confirmed through this project since “Topic Sentence” was evident several times during the writing activities collected during the while stage. It was also evident in the crossword activity carried out in the classroom where the students had to organize a paragraph from their cultural studies subject and they were able to organize it based on the topic sentence.

During the first session, the pupils confirmed to have ability to write paragraphs. Although they did not work on the computers because of their availability, I observed that most of them wrote the paragraph taking topic sentence and details into account.

Another evidence of this progress is observable in the samples where the number of occurrences of writing *topic sentence* increased significantly. They wrote four extra papers in total in a free way in Language and Cultural Studies classes. (see appendix 11-12) But it is important to clarify that those samples were not written after working with Hot Potatoes activities. The cultural Studies teacher did not guide students to follow the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, she gave them a topic and the students had to write about it.

When the students were asked in the post questionnaire whether they knew the structure of a paragraph, most of them answered affirmatively. Although this question is not consistent because it is subjective it can be said that there was a positive aspect in the development of the study since students learned to write the topic sentence of a paragraph.

The following graph shows the results related to students' knowledge of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph.



Graph 1. Post-questionnaire question # 3

The students' progress in knowledge of the rhetorical structure of the paragraph confirms the ideas presented in the literature review chapter of this study in which Walter (2000) mentions that the rhetorical structure of a paragraph must contain three parts; topic sentence, body sentences, and concluding sentence. On the other hand, Kassen, Wahba, Zeinab & Taha (2006, p. 284) state that the interactive materials created with Hot Potatoes is an additional resource that contributes to the development of learners' language ability to determine their own learning and to encourage them to be aware of their learning process.

This excerpt illustrates an example of the students' degree of awareness of the "topic sentence" before and after the implementation of the study.

Pre-test

Its name is gimnasio iragua, it is a big and beautiful school I'm in 4 grade is a bilingual school my classroom has 24 girls, all of them are beautiful. Is a female school it means that only are girls in the school. The school has a lot zone green where the girls can play and enjoy. I have been here since last year I want to stay here until I finish the school.

Post.test

I have been in 4th grade since last year. I have enjoyed this year so much. Also I learned a lot. now I have a lot of friends in the grade. we are 24 nowadays we are missing only one week. I will never forget this year because it is impossible to do. I have also very funny teachers maybe next year they will not going to teach me. I love this school and I will never forget it.

Excerpt 2. Student' pre and post writing test.

Finally, it is significant that despite the progress demonstrated by pupils, they still have to improve this aspect, as some of them evidence problems with the rhetorical structure of paragraphs, even if they are familiar with the main elements. It was noticed that in the post-test many students scored a lower performance than in the pre-test: they did very well when writing the topic sentence but seemed to be unaware of the rest of the elements to give a paragraph its rhetorical structure. Apparently, the students were not motivated at the end of the study or they need to be exposed to more or different activities of the type carried out in this study.

Subcategory 2: Evidence of paragraph organization.

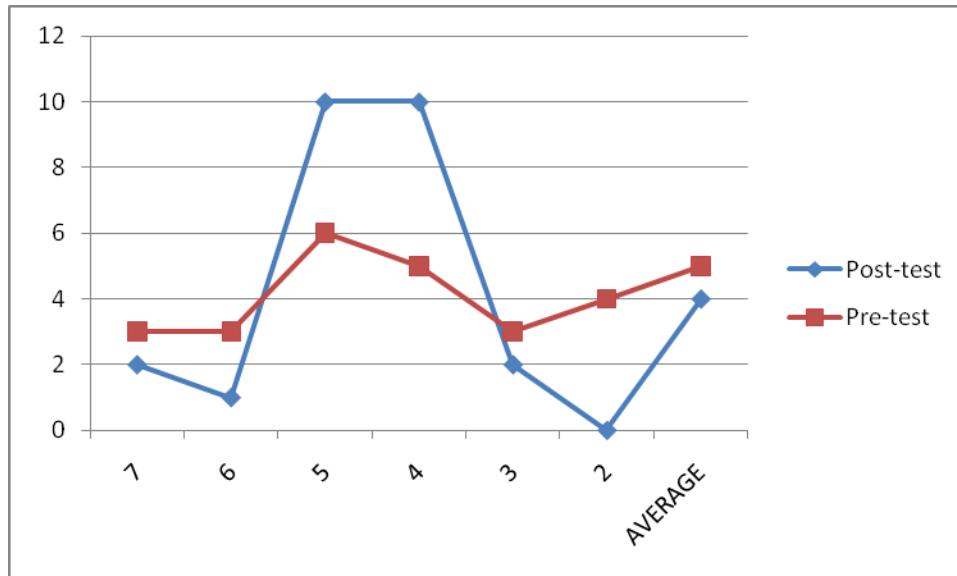
It is interesting to realize that from the beginning the writer assumed that few learners had awareness of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. Nevertheless, what the students' samples revealed is that a good number of them had a notion of how a paragraph is organized without necessarily being aware that this is called "rhetorical structure". In their initial paragraphs the students wrote sentences paying attention to the order. However, the analysis of the post-test compositions revealed that a great deal of the students composed paragraphs without an adequate rhetorical structure, which may indicate that the intervention was not effective in improving the students' knowledge of paragraph structure.

In the following table the pre, and post test activities are represented, being evident that the number of students who have an awareness of how to organize a paragraph is lower than the number of students who don't.

ACTIVITY/GRADE	7	6	5	4	3	2	AVERAG E
Post-test	2	1	10	10	2	0	4
Pre-test	3	3	6	5	3	4	5

Table 1. Students' awareness of paragraph organization

After the implementation of the activities, the tendency changed drastically. It is clear that effective organization of paragraphs was much lower than expected. The following graph shows the negative trend presented by the students in this particular aspect.



Graph 4. Paragraph organization

What the data presented above suggest is that even though in general ICTs in language instruction facilitate learning, and that the students showed improvement in the use of the topic sentence, the activities designed with the technological tool Hot Potatoes did not allow them learn the whole rhetorical structure of a paragraph. The activities helped the students to reinforce the topic sentence, that they were working before the study.

Excerpt 3 exemplifies the students' regression in writing well organized paragraphs.

Pre-test Activity

"I like my school because I can learn and I can stay with my friends. I like the parks and that is very big. in this school I feel that I am in home. I like this school very much I stay here since I have 3 years old. I also like that the teachers all the days are smiling to all the students. Also, that the students are respectful to the teachers and finally I like much this school because it has beautiful trees. "

Post- test Activity

"My school is called Gimansio Iragua, I learn in this school since 7 years, I learn many thingd and know many persons. In the school the teachers do many activities and that's why the school is very funny. the girls and the teachers are very friendly person. I love my school and I don't want that my parents be trasladed because sometimes it pass and I cant be in the school."

Excerpt 3. Sample of a students' regression

Main Category: Use of technology

This category also emerged from the purpose of this study which involves the use of the free Internet software called “Hot Potatoes”, to help the students improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. This category is about the attitudes and results obtained by the students while using the software at the computer lab. These are the subcategories: *Evidence of motivation, and Evidence of awareness when writing in another subject*. The following is the analysis I made of these categories.

Category 1. Evidence of Motivation

This category is evident in the field notes and blog. Although there were some difficulties with internet access to work on the planned activities, it was observed that the students were motivated while they were carrying out the activities in most of the sessions.

“The students felt comfortable working with the activities. They made questions about the activity called Hot Potatoes since they did not know about that. They wrote a reflection about the Hot Potatoes activity and mailed back to the teachers. The students can access to the link and develop the whole activity. I observed that most of the students used the hint to find quickly the answer. They were concentrated working on the computers.”

Excerpt 4. Blog diary

During the sessions students showed a great enthusiasm when working with the computer activities, they never demonstrated unwillingness or lack of interest. Each session, they seemed to be more sure and involved to do the activities in a faster and best way. This is evident in the mails or comments students did after doing the activities.

“Can I repeat this activity?” They asked when they finish an activity.
“The link closed Can I repeat the activity to obtain a better score?”

Excerpt 5. Students' comments

hello mayiver I like a lot the activity because is very funny jejejejejeje I feel very funny, the activity are very creative because is a proposit to form unit the words, I learn about the sinonims

and is not necessary use the same words to write the same main idea

is very very good activity

bye and good luck

hello mayiber

I fell very good doing this activity, i like this types of activities because you can learn plaing, i learn to do more properly a paragraph and many things more.

bye mayiber!!!!!!!!!!!!

Except 6: Students' mails

According to Haydn & Counsell (2003) the use of ICTs in the classroom helps the teachers to make lessons more interesting, explain topics more clearly and encourage the teachers to vary the class organization. So, the use of ICTs in language instruction allows to create connections between the classroom teaching and learning practices and the pupils' real lives. In this study, the use of ICTs specifically Hot Potatoes program was an important tool to make classes varied and meaningful for students, and consequently the motivation increased and allowed them to enjoy the activities

Subcategory 2. Evidence of awareness when writing in another subject.

It has to be noted that after certain sessions students became more aware of the way they have to use the rhetorical structure of a paragraph to improve their writing. This category is more evident in the teachers' comments and students' documents collected in classes where they did not work with Hot Potatoes activites. Although the teachers from Sicence and Cultural Studies subjects only answered the questionnaires, it is important to note that they observed the students' awareness when writing paragraphs in their subjects and they made comments about it. These instruments revealed that during the whole process, learners used what they learned during the

implementation of this study. As time passed, I observed that most of the students were aware of the use of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph in activities in which they have to write. The data suggests that learners become aware of their need to write properly.

“I am proud of girls from 4A because they have improved their writing. I will add their jobs to a brochure I did with some paragraphs written by students who have shown difficulties to write”.

“They have improve in coherence and appying new vocabulary, connectors and in a paragraph structure”.

“Students learned to use mind maps or charts in the pre-writing activities as bas of thir writing. They learned how to write a paragraph with topic sentences and supporting details”.

“Sometimes they ask if their sentence is a topic sentence or a detail”.

Excerpt 8. Teachers' comments

COMPARISION OF MODERN AND COLONIAL HOUSES

Modern houses and colonial houses are different because: modern houses are white or red or grey but colonial houses are blue, red, yellow or green. They were colorful. Modern houses colors are not eye catching and their rooms and gardens either. Modern houses rooms are too small and the gardens are in the back of the house, but colonial houses had hudge rooms and the gardens were in the middle of the house. Also colonial houses were bigger but only with one floor and modern houses have more than one floor. Nowadays the houses are plain without colors but we have a place to live.

Laura Beatriz Fuentes Leon - 4A

Excerpt 9 Student' sample of writing Cultural Studies

Beatty (2003) claims that when the pupils use the computer on a regular basis, they are unaware that they are learning. Besides, children view computers as toys that they can listen to and learn from, and consequently this makes technology a good tool to engage them in learning.

The event mentioned before is confirmed by Hornberger (2007) who expresses that “language awareness can be defined as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception in the language learning, language teaching and language use”. Therefore in this study, the pupils developed an ability to recognize and be conscious of the rhetorical structure of a paragraph. This category relates to the *Evidence of awareness when writing* because most of them were able to write good paragraphs (see appendix 12). The sample shows that the students became aware of the importance of use the rhetorical structure of a paragraph when writing.

Ausebel cited by Brown (2007) claims that in order that the learning occurs, it is essential to take learner’s previous experience related to the specific topic being taught into account. The rhetorical structure of a paragraph knowledge was strongly adhere to students’ understanding due to implementation of Hot Potatoes activities. For this reason, the students demonstrated ability to use the rhetorical structure of a paragraph since they wrote descriptive paragraphs in their Cultural Studies class. In addition, some of the paragraphs that the students wrote in this subject were done in the computers, that could be a tool that stimulated writing. The students were more motivated to write regarding the previous information they got (schemata) about the topic. They felt confident and used the rhetorical structure of a paragraph learned during the implementation of this study.

Despite the students’ progress demonstrated during the intervention and in their cultural studies subject, the results obtained in the post test were not favorable because the students focused on writing the topic sentence in their narratives paragraphs. This phenomenon could have occurred because of two reasons: the students wrote the post test in a free way but they did not follow the rhetorical structure of a paragraph even they were asked to use it and they tried to cover many ideas and they focused only on the topic sentence.

Moving on to the last stage *Reporting the outcomes*, Burns suggests presenting a report of the findings to the colleagues, institution, or someone who might be interested in or benefited from the results obtained. She claims that it is important to include the major points and process carried out in the study, supporting them with relevant samples of data.

Validity and Reliability

The principal explanation of triangulation in qualitative research is to increase the credibility and validity of the outcomes. According to Cohen and Manion (2005), triangulation is an "attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint". In this study, I designed and implemented different instruments for data collection and analysis such field notes, students' documents, questionnaires and blog diary. This is why the results were the product of the analysis for two or more instruments. However, the students' questionnaires were not a rigorous instrument for this study since the questions did not allow gathering objective information. They were designed in order to ask the students about their opinions regarding their understanding and knowledge of a paragraph structure, consequently they only measured the students' opinion and feelings.

For this reason, I used investigator triangulation. Burns (1999), states that this type of triangulation helps to "avoid observer bias and provides checks on the reliability of the observations". Denzin (1998) cited by Freeman (1998) states that the investigator triangulation in which more than one investigator, is used to collect the data that allows observe or study the phenomenon or behavior in order to have a general picture of the problem and state their points of view. Bearing this in mind, the writing activities collected

form Cultural Studies subject were used in order to provide an appropriate judgment to the validity of this study. In addition, another aspect that guarantees the validity is the fact that I avoided subjectivity when analyzing the data.

Conclusions

This section presents a summary of the main findings of this action research project, the pedagogical implications, the limitations and the further research recommendations for those who may be interested in conducting a study on the same topic.

The main objective set for this project was to find out if the use of Hot Potatoes activities help students to improve their writing skill. In order to achieve this aim, the study focused on helping students to improve the rhetorical structure of a narrative paragraph to improve their writing.

Taking the results into account, it can be stated that in order to learn to use the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, the narrative style was not the most appropriate for this study. According to Spencer (2005), narrative is a personal experience in which the writer can use sensory details and a basic story structure, it means, the writer does not follow the basic structure of a paragraph. Bearing this in mind, it is important that before implementing Hot Potatoes activities the researcher makes an analysis of the kind of paragraphs in order to find out which is the most appropriate to teach the rhetorical structure.

On the other hand, it was observed that the students learned how to write properly the topic sentence when they wrote narrative paragraphs. This aspect has to be highlighted since having it clear how to write the topic sentence it

is basic for writing a well-structured paragraph.

Although this study was based on using narrative paragraphs to learn the rhetorical structure of a paragraph, the student's demonstrated ability to use the basic paragraph structure, as was observed when they wrote descriptive paragraphs in other subject regarding a specific topic.

Taking into account the students' high level of motivation when working with Hot potatoes tool, it is recommended to introduce these types of technological means in the learning, practice and reinforcement of the second language skills.

Finally, Hot Potatoes program demonstrated to be a tool that benefited the teacher and the students. It benefited the students because they received feedback on their activities immediately; and it benefited the teacher because she could design the activities according to the students' level and age.

Pedagogical Implications

The following are the pedagogical implications of this study. These have to do with the improvement in writing strategies that respond to the curriculum demands of the school in which the write works. Taking into account that one of the aims of the school is to help students to advance in their writing skill from elementary levels, English teachers have to take into consideration the use of technological tools to help students to improve and reinforce their writing skills and knowledge. It is necessary that teachers give the students appropriate input and practice, in order to provide them with tools to develop writing skill. Additionally the students need to be able to access to different technological tools that encourage them to practice what they learn in class. In this way, the teachers can reflect

more on their learning and teaching practices regarding their students' strengths and weakness to make use of technological tools and to motivate students to write in a meaningful way.

Limitations

In regards with the limitations faced during this study, the first one is related to the computer lab availability. The school only has one computer room that is mainly used for technology classes. So the researcher to adjust her English classes and sometimes change the schedule in order to find the appropriate space that was suitable for students and that did not affect the researcher's other classes. Another limitation was that in order to start working with the program, the writer had to send the link to the students by mail and it was difficult for some of them to remember their passwords or access to internet. It took the researcher a lot of time and effort to support them and open she had to open her own mail to allow them to access to the link. It was time consuming before each session and this took the researcher's time that should have been devoted to other classes.

According to Freeman (1998), teachers have to "walk away from past answers and tried-and-true-activities and toward the risk of exploring the unknown". It can be sated that one of the most important characteristics of this action research process is that it is necessary that teachers change their minds and start thinking about different situations that occur in the classroom in order to adopt an inquisitive attitude that allows them to investigate into strategies that help their students to overcome certain difficulties related to the language.

One negative aspect the writer came across to carry out this study was the designing of the instruments. At that moment, the writer had thought that questionnaires were the easiest instruments to handle and that they would provide her with enough data to answer the research question. However, the writer spent her time working on them but did not narrow down the questions, so they were too general and subjective, and worst of all, it was not possible to obtain data from them. The writer found this constraint especially because she wanted to obtain specific answers that help her to address her action research question.

The project helped the writer to identify students' main difficulties and set up an action plan to help them to advance in their writing skill. Nevertheless, the results were not entirely positive in this study. There are some aspects that must be improved or balanced on a second cycle. Bearing this in mind the following are some recommendations for further research

Further Recommendations

The following recommendations will be useful for teachers who may like to continue the second cycle of this project in relation to the writing progress by using technology.

To start with, I think that the role of teacher as researcher is a challenge that requires time and devotion. Teachers as researchers should raise questions about their teaching process through the observation by taking into account the students' learning needs and making a reflection about the teachers' job and responsibilities, in order to assess their performance and design action plans for doing a better job and become better

teachers. Being involved in an action research also implies changing the mind and look for different strategies that help the learners to overcome their difficulties. In other words, teachers as researchers need to be ready to evaluate, analyze and change their work and classes in order to improve their own practice and make the learning process meaningful.

This study gave me the opportunity to realize that the use of ICTs to improve the rhetorical structure of a paragraph motivated the students and allowed them to learn writing the topic sentence. For that reason, future research could be conducted regarding the impact that ICTs have in students structuring different kinds of paragraphs and essays and which type of paragraph is the most appropriate to deal with the rhetorical structure.

Additional research could also focus on the analysis of one or two Hot Potatoes activities for two reasons. First, during the project it was demonstrated that the use of Hot Potatoes activities allowed the students to learn and reinforce the topic sentence. Indeed, working with one or two specific activities could give teachers the opportunity to design several exercises with the same activity, according to the students' needs. In addition, the activities might motivate the students toward the learning, given that the program provides accessibility and quick feedback. The study could also implement additional technological tools that help the students to improve or reinforce the language aspect needed.

Second, the teacher should find out which of the six Hot Potatoes activities is the most appropriate for each student because the learners have different learning styles and not all the activities can fit students' needs, interest or abilities. Knowing the students' learning styles could help the teachers to design the activities in a meaningful way and allow the pupils to understand and use the rhetorical structure of a paragraph easily.

In many ways, the data analysis was the most difficult step during this study. The process of data collection and analysis must go parallel in order to avoid time waste. According to Somekh (2006), flexibility is an essential feature of action research, and it results from cycling back and forth from data collection analysis to further data collection and so on. Therefore, I began the analysis when I had all the data collected but I left aside the option of going back and forth in order to make this step more useful, successful and easier.

Another aspect related to data analysis that I would recommend for further research is to take into account from the beginning, that once the instruments are designed it is absolutely necessary to verify their usefulness. I would recommend any other teacher who decides to work with questionnaires to analyze the questions in order to know if they are going to provide validity to the study and help to answer the research question. In addition I would also recommend implementing more instruments that allow researchers gather the data and use it in the data analysis.

A final recommendation for further research is aimed at taking risks. Since the new learning environments and that ICTs are accessible in many places, it would be useful for teachers to start researching about the influence of technological tools to improve not only students' language skills but also to find out strategies that help the students to develop their motivation and autonomy. Teachers have to take risks when researching in order to know to what extent the use of ICTs engage the students to learn and use the language in their real, daily life.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

RUBRICS

The school grades the students with the scale from 1 to 7. Bearing this in mind, the rubrics that I will use has the scale from 2 to 7 and I will adapt it based on the book “Write Source #6” written by Dave Kemper, Patrick Sebranek, and Verne Meyer (2005 p. 130). I will focus on four aspects: Ideas, Organization, Word choice and Conventions.

Ideas: Student uses details to make the reader know what happens next.


Organization: How the students apply the rhetorical structure to organize their ideas in the paragraph

Word Choice: Use of nouns, verbs etc...

Conventions: How the student uses the punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar.

	7	6	5	4	3	2
Ideas	The topic and details are well developed.	The topic is clear and uses many details.	The details tell about the topic.	More details are needed.	Details that don't fit the topic confuse the reader.	The topic is not clear.
Organization	All parts of the paragraph are strong.	The beginning middle and ending work well.	The parts of the paragraph are in order.	Some parts are unclear..	All parts of the paragraph run together.	The order of the information is confusing.
Word Choice	Words make the paragraph memorable.	Words make the meaning clear.	Most words tell about the topic.	Clearer words are needed.	Some words are overused.	Words are used incorrectly.
Conventions	Conventions are used well.	More conventions are correct.	There are a few errors.	Errors may confuse the reader	Errors make the paragraph hard to understand.	Help is needed to make corrections.




Appendix 2



Students' questionnaires

Dear students,

Answer the following questionnaire honestly. Write an X in the column that best fits your answer.

Question			
Am I good at writing?			
Can I write informal paragraphs?		X	
Do I know the structure of the paragraphs?	X		
Do I have to write paragraphs in science, cultural studies and English?		X	
How I feel when writing in English?		X	
Do I really enjoy writing paragraphs?	X		
Do I enjoy working on the computer?	X		
Can I use my computer at home?			X
Can I send mails and attach files?	X	X	
Have I worked with "Hot Potatoes" program?		X	
			X

Appendix 3:



Teachers' Pre Questionnaire

Dear teacher, the following questionnaire is to know about the writing level of students from fourth A. Please, answer the questions honestly. This information will be used to help students to improve their writing skills.

Questions	Yes	No
Do you use writing activities in your class?	X	
Do your students write paragraphs frequently?	X	
Do you like assigning writing activities to your students?	X	
Are the students able to write coherent informal paragraphs in your subject? <i>Some of them</i>		
Do the students use appropriate vocabulary when writing?		
Are their paragraphs well-developed, organized and coherent?		X

Do your students have difficulties when writing informal paragraphs? If so, describe the problems they have.

The main problem they have is related to coherence and text organization. Students express their ideas in an isolated way, they don't use linking words. They need as well to practice spelling.

Yakup
Cultural Studies teacher

Appendix 4

Consent letter

ASPAEN GIMNASIO IRAGUA

Bogotá, abril de 2009

Señores
PADRES DE FAMILIA

Cordial saludo.

Mediante la presente les informo que su hija ha sido seleccionada para participar en un proyecto de investigación que estoy realizando con la Universidad de la Sabana, Departamento de Lenguas, en la maestría de “Didáctica del Inglés y Ambientes de Aprendizaje Autónomo”.

El proyecto tiene como objetivo mejorar la habilidad de escritura a través del uso de la tecnología. Para tal fin se realizarán seis sesiones desde el 3 de abril al 15 de mayo del año en curso. Dichas actividades se llevarán a cabo durante la hora de clase con la guía de la docente. Es importante aclarar que dichos talleres no afectarán el desarrollo del programa de inglés del grado cuarto, ya que han sido diseñadas de acuerdo con el currículo y los contenidos del libro.

Si están de acuerdo con lo anterior les agradezco firmar y llenar el formato anexo autorizando a su hija para participar en este proyecto.

Cordialmente,

Mayiber Quintana R.
Docente de Inglés

FAVOR DILIGENCIAR EL DESPRENDIBLE Y ENTREGARLO A LA PROFESORA DE INGLES

Nosotros: _____ y _____

Autorizamos a nuestra hija: _____ Grado _____

para participar en el proyecto de investigación con el Departamento de lenguas de la Universidad de la Sabana.

FIRMA DE MAMÀ

FRIMA DE PAPÀ

Appendix 6

Index =>

The panda bear

Gap-fill exercise

Fill in all the gaps, then press "Check" to check your answers. Use the "Hint" button to get a free letter if an answer is giving you trouble. You can also click on the "[?]" button to get a clue. Note that you will lose points if you ask for hints or clues!

My favorite [?] is the Giant Panda for [?] reasons. First of all, I like the panda [?] it [?] so [?] and cuddly. The panda's black and white [?] colors are simple, make it stand out, and look soft. Its sad looking [?] makes me want to hug it and make it happy. [?], I am fond of the giant panda because it is endangered. We all should try to [?] the animals, like the panda, that are in danger of extinction. Clearly, the Giant Panda is the animal I like best.

Check Hint

Index =>

Appendix 8



treasures

897

THIS BLOG HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO FOLLOW THE PROCESS OF MY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT.

sábado 28 de marzo de 2009

My Action Research Project

INTRODUCTION

Teachers face different situations in their daily activities that require their abilities to find out strategies, plan activities, facilitate process, monitor progress, design and implement improvements for helping students to get better results in the learning process. However, it is necessary to focus on specific problems in order to examine them and solve the difficulty in the classroom.

According Stephen Corey (1953) "Action Research is the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct, and evaluate their decisions and actions". Also Sagor (2000) states that an action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by a person or people empowered to take an action, and that

i touch the future i teach



profile

Mayiber

My name is Mayiber Quintana Rodriguez. I studied "Licenciatura en Educación Básica Primaria". Currently I am an English teacher. I have been teaching English for two years and I have worked mainly

Appendix 9



ASPAEN GIMNASIO IRAGUA

ENGLISH WRITING POST TEST

Name maribel Valencia Date 05/28/2009

Write complete paragraphs taking into account paragraph structure.

My favorite food

My favorite food is the hotdog. The hotdog is my favorite food because it is very delicious and I like a lot. The hotdog is compound of sausage, sauces and with bread.

My mother all the days cooks my a hotdog, and I like the hotdogs of my mother there are delicious

In conclusion the hotdogs are my favorite food.

RUBRICS




	7	6	5	4	3	2
Ideas				X		
Organization				X		
Word Choice				X		
Conventions				X		

Appendix 10



Students' Post Questionnaire

Dear students,
 Answer the following questionnaire honestly. Write an X in the column that best fits your answer.

Question			
Can I write different kinds of paragraphs?			
Can I write follow the steps to write a paragraph?			
Do I know the structure of the paragraphs?			
Can I write paragraphs in science, cultural studies and English easily?			
Now how I feel when writing in English?			
I really enjoy writing paragraphs			
Can I use the Hot Potatoes activities easily?			
Do the Hot Potatoes activities help me to improve my writing?			

Appendix 11

Teachers' Questionnaires

Dear teacher, the following questionnaire is to know about the writing level of students from fourth A. Please, answer the questions honestly. This information will be used to help students to improve their writing skills.

Questions	Yes	No
Do you use writing activities in your class?	X	
Do your students write paragraphs frequently?		X
Do you like assigning writing activities to your students?	X	
Are the students able to write coherent informal paragraphs in your subject?		X
Do the students use appropriate vocabulary when writing?		X
Are their paragraphs well-developed, organized and coherent?		X

Do your students have difficulties when writing informal paragraphs? If so, describe the problems they have.

In my class the writing activities are few, but when they have to answer an evaluation, the use of the connectors is really bad. In general, they know the ideas they want to express, but they don't know how to write them in a good way.

They have a lot of ideas that can be written in a good way, I know they know because they express them in an oral way, but when they have to write them, they have difficulties. The lack of vocabulary is one of their problems when they write, sometimes they use words in spanish, so they can express what they want to say.

They have to learn how to organize their ideas, and connect them to make a good paragraph.

Appendix 12 Project Program

<i>Date</i>	<i>Activity</i>
April 3 rd	Teachers' pre questionnaire
April 3 rd	Collect students' samples work from English class
April 14 th	Students' questionnaire and writing pretest with format.
April 15 th	First Hot Potatoes activity. Matching words http://uk1.hotpotatoes.net/ex/40618/CUNHBGAT.php
April 17 th	Second Hot Potatoes activity. Filling in the gap http://uk1.hotpotatoes.net/ex/40602/TOHBSIOP.php
April 22 th	Third Hot Potatoes activity. Crossword http://uk1.hotpotatoes.net/ex/40611/XVXSCTWW.php
April 24 th	Fourth Hot Potatoes activity. Quiz parts of a paragraph http://uk1.hotpotatoes.net/ex/40616/KQTJLVUK.php
April 27 th	Fifth Hot Potatoes activity. Mix sentences http://uk1.hotpotatoes.net/ex/40615/GOZTNXZK.php
April 29 th	Students Post test, and teachers' post questionnaire
April 30 th	Students' post questionnaire

Appendix 1

1

Cultural Studies Samples

COMPARISION OF MODERN AND COLONIAL HOUSES

Modern houses and colonial houses are different because: modern houses are white or red or grey but colonial houses are blue, red, yellow or green. They were colorful. Modern houses colors are not eye catching and their rooms and gardens either. Modern houses rooms are too small and the gardens are in the back of the house, but colonial houses had hudge rooms and the gardens were in the middle of the house. Also colonial houses were bigger but only with one floor and modern houses have more than one floor. Nowdays the houses are plain without colors but we have a place to live.



Laura Beatriz Fuentes Leon - 4A

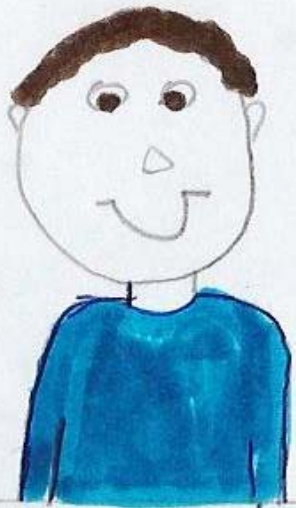
History of the architecture of Bogotá

The first architecture of Bogota was built in 1.800, and then the people built the Bolivar Square in 1.848. Later, the architects thought: "why don't we built another building for Bogotá? And the architects built Teatro Colón which is very famous. In 1.926 architects built Capitolio Nacional then they built railroad in the year 1.950, and a famous museum called Planetario Distrital was built again in year 2.000.

By Laura Lloveras 4A

Appendix 12

Language Free writing Samples



My uncle

I love my uncle because he is so special to me and his name is Dilmes.

My uncle is a veterinary so he love animals like me. He has brown eyes, brown hair and curly hair too. He is short and a little fat. His birthday is 16 of march. and he has 37 years old.



He is a boy. He has blue pants, brown jacket and boots and hat, and red gloves. He is having fun because he has a sledge, a brown sledge. He's face shows that he is a happy boy, he has red mouth and his eyes are dark brown. I see that he is in a hill and he is alone.



He is an other boy, but this boy is bigger than the other and his sledge is yellow. He is not in a hill he is in the Ice playing. He has a beautiful red ribbon and purple hat and clothes, and his clothes are like a pijama, and he has grey boots. He is happy playing in the Ice.



This is a very small squirrel, this squirrel has black eyes a big nose and a little mouth. It has brown and a soft skin and have a rock in her hands, her legs are very big and a long tail. It is very beautiful.



This is a very big hippopotamus, is very cute. It has black eyes and its color is blue.

This hippopotamus has big eyes, big mouth, big nose and small ears. I love animals.