The Effect of Planning Pre-writing vs. Post-writing Task on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners’ Paragraph Writing Ability

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Abstract: The present study sought to investigate the effect of pre-writing versus post-writing task on Iranian EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability. 45 intermediate students were selected via administering the OPT, then they divided into three groups of 15 and were randomly assigned to two experimental and one control groups. A pretest of writing was administered to all groups, after that, the researcher applied the pre-writing task for experimental group 1 and post-writing task for experimental group 2 for 10 sessions while there was no treatment for the control group. A posttest of writing was then administered to all three groups and the data were analyzed a paired-samples T-test and ANOVA coefficients. The results of the study indicated that the participants performed better when they took part in a test after they were treated with pre-writing and post-writing tasks.

Index Terms: task, pre-writing, post-writing, writing skill

1. INTRODUCTION

Today writing is a central practice in the process of teaching and learning in schools, and is often used for assessing what and how much students know about a given topic. However, learning writing seems to be the most difficult skill in language learning specially for EFL learners. As experience shows, teaching methods for writing in Iranian educational contexts are mostly product-oriented and Iranian EFL students have limited knowledge about process of writing. Yet it is expected that EFL students’ writings should be well organized, coherent, and involve various criteria such as using correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, structure and be successful in communicating ideas. However, most of students have problems in writing to that extent.

As Hadley (2003) argued, good writers show some evidence of planning or organizing before they sit down to write the first draft. Then they rescan their writing to maintain a sense of the whole composition (“p.320”). To do this, using cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies are demanded. But poor writers are not very thoughtful and usually have no plan when writing. In order to help the students to improve their writing, numerous methods and approaches have been designed and experienced. White and Arndt (1991) introduced writing as a complex, cognitive process that needs to continuation of intellectual effort over a considerable period. As the concept of writing has changed from that of a product to a process, the emphasize of the teachers also changed to provide more assistance during the prewriting, writing and post writing phases of assigned writing activities. Instruction in writing demands more practice and students should be encouraged to analyze and
evaluate them in order to have an effective and coherent writing.

The concept of language skills is premised on the fact that language consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Cook, 2001). Among these four skills, listening and reading are categorized as receptive skills while speaking and writing are categorized as productive skills. Writing is an important productive skill that is fundamental in advancing knowledge. This is because writing involves the composition of new meaning from fresh ideas and existing facts in which sentences have special relationships to each other. Cooper (1988) point out that writing is directly related to the way one learns. This is because this skill helps students to be active thinkers and learners through direct involvement in the construction of new meaning. Hughey et al. (1983) noted that the skill of writing helps students to reinforce vocabulary skills as they search for the appropriate words required in their writing task. Similarly, grammar patterns are also enhanced by writing as when learners write, they have to make correct decisions on the appropriate syntactic patterns, discourse markers and registers to be utilized in order to convey their thoughts and ideas effectively.

Compared with the “product-oriented” approach and the “process-oriented” approach, the task-based approach advocates that all the language skills should be integrated in the process of learning and teaching. According to Nunan (2004), task-based teaching focuses not only on communicating through interaction in the target language, but also on grammatical accuracy and forms. It is expected to overcome the shortcomings of the traditional English writing approaches.

Recent years have seen an enormous growth of interest in task-based language learning and teaching (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Skehan, 1996, 1998; Willis, 1996). The purpose of present study is to examine the effect of pre-writing versus post-writing task on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability. In doing so, it attempts to investigate whether the results obtained will confirm the finding of previous studies in language learning settings or not.

Based on the problems and the purpose discussed above, the following research question was addressed:

RQ) Does planning pre-writing vs. post-writing task have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability?
The research question of this study can result in the following hypothesis:

H0: Planning pre-writing vs. post-writing task does not have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability.

2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

What makes writing difficult? What factors contribute to this difficulty? These questions on writing have been answered by previous researches but still, many students have poor writing abilities. What could be an effective approach to improve students’ writing skills? Writing is difficult, as it requires, active thinking throughout a continuous productive process in which thoughts and ideas are transferred into written communication, but not just words and letters on paper.

Writing as a productive process is influenced by certain elements, such as vocabulary, grammar, organization, spelling, and punctuation. Walters (1983) considers writing as a process of construction, with the simple sentence being the basic element. By this, he means that writing is a systematic process in which mastery of one level is required before the learner may advance to the next. In addition Reid (1993), states that writing is usually easier, better and more successful when talking, drafting, revising and editing together in groups forms a core part of the writing process. According to Wang (2004, p. 24), One important reason for poorly organized, insufficiently developed and grammatically awkward students’ written English is that learners have not been helped to become motivated, involved in their own learning, or self-sufficient. A way to motivate learners, according to Ellis (1994), is to design challenging tasks that present students with opportunities for communication and self-direction. Richards and Rodgers (2001) assert that “task-based language teaching refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core units of planning and instruction in language teaching. Although the designs of task-based lesson have been proposed variously, they all include three common phases (Willis, 1996).

According to Willis (1996), the first common phase in all task-based lessons is pre-task. It concerns the various activities that teacher and students can undertake before they start the task. The second phase is the task that centers on the task itself and various instructional options. The last common phase in task-based lessons is post task. It involves procedures for
following up on the task performance. The post-task phase has three major pedagogic goals: (1) to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task; (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed; and (3) to encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task (Ellis, 2002).

Process-oriented research suggests that we can help students become more competent L2 writers by describing and modeling for them the processes and strategies that underlie effective writing (e.g., generating ideas, planning, drafting, and revising) and providing them with feedback on their performance until they are able to apply these processes and strategies independently and flexibly in relation to their goals and task requirements (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; Cumming, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002; Roen, 1989; Sasaki, 2000; Sengupta, 2000).

The idea of getting learners to acquire English through Task-Based Strategies, which refers to task-based instruction (TBI), was developed in India by Prabhu in the 1980s. His approach was a reaction both against the traditional form of English as a foreign language (EFL) used in India and against the type of communicative language teaching which was practiced there (Jean & Hahn, 2004; Waguey & Hufanam, 2013). Prabhu’s project, in India, is mostly calling attention to the cognitive processes entailed by tasks. He talks about tasks involving ‘some processes of thought’ (Prabhu, 1987). However, according to Nunan (1989), task-based instruction is a way of designing teaching syllabuses which consists of a set of communicative tasks, and a way to involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. In Iran the idea of task-based syllabuses has not been widely discussed. Communicative activities, if at all, usually appear after learning linguistic rules with teacher-led instructions (Fatehi rad & Jafari, 2013).

Task-based writing is one of the most important and inseparable part of task-based instruction. Cabral (2003) asserts that writing is a social act. Even when the writers are in the EFL language classroom context, their texts not only show their capability to solve a problem, but also their texts show their awareness of their own communicative goals. To empirically examine task-based writing instruction, Bantis (2008), in his thesis, focused on meaning with an occasional shift to grammar. Therefore, after the end of the writing conference held by the teacher, the students were required to compare their rough drafts and the final draft created by the teacher so as to notice differences between their interlanguage and standard English. Doing so, he found that task-based writing instruction can be a useful vehicle for differentiated instruction and it represents a teaching strategy that is consistent with principles of second language acquisition to address the diverse needs of second language learners. It is worth adding that, in the process of writing under learner-centered approaches to language teaching, editing is one of the key stages in which learners need to have a good degree of autonomy.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample/ Participants

The participants of the present study were 45 female intermediate EFL learners who were selected from 100 learners. They were assigned into three groups of 15 learners, and received ten sessions of instruction (treatment) of English writing class at Rahyane elm institute in Shirood, a city in Mazandaran, one of the northern provinces of Iran. The average age of the participants was about 18, and they shared the same language proficiency level. They were EFL learners of English and had been studying at the same Institute for about three years. The students had never been in an English Speaking Country before. To ensure the participants actual proficiency level and homogeneity, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered and based on their scores, they had been divided into two groups. These two groups were randomly specified as the experimental groups of the study and the third group served as the control group that would receive no treatment. The participants in the first group comprised the experimental group1 (pre-task based writing), the participants in the second group comprised the experimental group2 (post-task based writing) and the participants in the third group comprised the control group (no treatment). The students had no opportunity to use English for communicative purposes outside the classroom and they were told that the tasks were for purposes of research only.
3.2 Procedure

The sorts of materials which were used in the present study are the OPT material for proficiency, the material for the pretest of the study, the material for the treatment of the study including: reading short stories, watching documentary, using pictures and so on, and finally, the material for the posttest of the study. The OPT used in this study consisted of several sections including grammar, sentence, organization, vocabulary, writing and so on. For each section, participants were asked to answer the question in the specified answer sheet. The answers were then collected and scored by the researcher. The pretest of the study consisted of a test of writing in which the students were supposed to write about a topic which was given to them. In other words, there was a topic and participants were supposed to write a paragraph about it. The material for posttest of the study consisted of a test of writing. The topic was given to the participants and was asked to write a well-formed paragraph. Since the present study was aimed at indicating the degree of progress from the pretest to the posttest in the experimental groups of the study in which using pre0writing and post-writing task were being applied, the same test was administered in both the experimental and the control groups. The reliability of scores was determined through inter-rater reliability of three experienced teachers. In this study the planning has two levels, pre-task planning and post-task planning. The setting in which the participants perform the tasks is their normal classroom. To assure the homogeneity of the participants, 100 students took the OPT test (and based on the scores, 45 students were chosen. The students were randomly divided into three groups (two experimental groups and one control group). Before instruction, the experimental groups were pre-tested in the classroom. They took the same pre-test. They wrote one-paragraph about topics given to them. The minimum and maximum length of the paragraph was specified (10 lines, about 150 words). The time allocation for the paragraph writing pretest was about 20 minutes. This test was administered between three groups of the study. The treatment of the study included 10 sessions. The experimental groups were treated via the determined pre-writing and post-writing tasks.

Samples of pre-writing task:

- Students discuss and write sub topics and details about the main topic that they will write about it. (encourage students to use phrases and simple sentences).
- Students read the passage or short-story which is related to the main topic that they will write about it.
- Students write the paragraph on the topic based on the mind-map that they had prepared before.
- Divide students into groups of 5. Then ask them to discuss and share their thoughts and opinions about the topic that they want to write, among their group members.
- Samples of post-writing task:
  - Students revise the paragraph individually. (self-correction)
  - Students correct each other work, rather than the teacher doing this. (peer-correction)

The experimental groups wrote their compositions regarded as pre-test and post-test. The groups were followed a pre-test which is writing one-paragraph, scoring their written paragraphs and marking their errors and turn them back to students considered as feedback, and post-test administration which was writing paragraphs with the same topics as written in pre-test. The students were provided with the correct forms and a general content comment based on course book used was presented to them in the point of their errors at the end of their paragraphs and they were asked to look at content comments at home. The students just wrote one paragraph both for pre-test and post-test based on the three topics given to them.

The pre-test and post-test paragraphs of both groups were graded based on a general impression of organization, development, style, and grammar. All paragraphs were read once and a quality rating of excellent, good, poor was given to each paper as the content comment. The rater also assigned score to each paragraph. Paragraphs were then read by the second raters and each was assigned a grade. The researcher and the other raters followed the same scoring components in order to rate.

The scores were taken into some criteria such as spelling, punctuation, having coherence and cohesion, well-formed
unity, and so on which is used by Brown (1991):

Table 3.1

*Categories for Evaluating Writing (Adapted from J. D. Brown, 1991)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of ideas through personal experiences, illustrations, facts, and options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of description, cause/effect, comparison/contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent focus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical sequence of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate length</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntax</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation of references (if applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neatness and appearance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The design of this study was quasi-experimental since the researcher divided the groups randomly and used pre-post testing. This means that there are tests done before any data is collected to see the students’ performance before the treatment. Then the actual experiment is done with post test results recorded to see whether the participants have any progress or not. In this research, there are two experimental groups which received the specific treatment and the control group which is placebo (no treatment). Here, the researcher is examining the effect of pre-writing and post-writing activity on intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability.
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of testing the hypotheses of the study have been presented and elaborated. In order to give a detailed analysis, attempts were made to take advantage of the results of the study as evidence to determine the rejection or support of the hypothesis. In addition, the rejection or support of the hypothesis was justified by explaining the consequences of such rejection or support, i.e. what would happen if the hypothesis of the current study was rejected or supported. Before analyzing the hypothesis, it will be repeated below:

H0: Planning pre-writing vs. post-writing task does not have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability.

The hypothesis of the study which targeted the effect of planning pre-writing vs. post-writing task on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability was rejected. Evidence from various sources of data could help to verify the rejection. The results of the one-way ANOVA of the study could be employed to confirm this analysis.

Table 4.1
The Summary of the One-Way ANOVA of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>31.508</td>
<td>15.754</td>
<td>3.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>210.817</td>
<td>5.019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>242.325</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on Table 4.1, the sig value is 0.005, which is less than 0.05 so the measure of type one error is low in this kind of test (one-way ANOVA) and F >1. Hence, the conclusion is that there was a difference somewhere among the mean scores of paragraph writing tests for all the three groups. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. Table 4.2 shows the descriptive analysis of the experimental and the control group of the study.

Table 4.2
The Summary of the Descriptive Analysis of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1 PreExperimental1</td>
<td>16.3500</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.37697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PosExperimental1</td>
<td>17.8667</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.93388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2 PreExperimental2</td>
<td>15.6333</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.60643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PosExperimental2</td>
<td>15.9000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.98777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3 Pre-Control</td>
<td>16.0500</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.27211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pos-Control</td>
<td>16.3833</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.54650</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is indicated in Table 4.2, the number of participants has been 15 in each experiment which means that all selected participants participated in the experiments of the study. The mean for the pretest of paragraph writing for the EX group1 was shown to be 16.3500 as compared to the mean for the posttest of paragraph writing which was 17.8667. Similarly, the mean for the pretest of paragraph writing for the EX group2 was shown to be 15.6333 as compared to the mean for the posttest of paragraph writing which was 15.9000. The mean for the pretest of paragraph writing for the CON group was shown to be 16.0500 as compared to the mean for the posttest of paragraph writing which was 16.3833 which reveals that the control group did not undergo any significant change because there was no treatment of the task and the possible significant rise in the post test mean may be because of other teaching features.

The next inferential analysis of the data of this study was related to the degree of progress from pretest to posttest of L2 paragraph writing in each group of the study. This was indicated by calculating the paired sample t-test. The results of
the paired sample t-test from pretest to posttest scores of the experimental groups and the control group of the study have been illustrated in table (4.3) below:

Table 4.3  
*The Summary of the Paired Sample T-test of the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pairs</th>
<th>Observed t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1 PreExperimental1-PosExperimental1</td>
<td>2.387</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2 PreExperimental2- PosExperimental2</td>
<td>0.590</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3 PreControl - PosControl</td>
<td>0.797</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 4.3, the observed t between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group 1 is 2.387, and the observed t between the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group 2 is 0.590, and the observed t between the pretest and the posttest of the control group is 0.797 and the critical t was 2.145. Also, the level of significance in all pairs is lower than or equal to 0.05 (P ≤ 0.05) which indicates that the obtained data have been dependable enough and the calculations are error-free. According to the paired sample T test illustrated in table (3), the observed t between the pretest and the posttest scores in the control group was lower than that of the experimental groups. This meant that the posttest scores of L2 paragraph writing were close to the pretest scores in the control group and indicated that not using prewriting and post-writing tasks did not have significant effect on the participants’ L2 paragraph writing and caused the posttest scores to stand as close as possible.

The motivation for the present study was the hypothesis which was formulated regarding the effect of pre-writing versus post-writing task on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability. Therefore, the following research question was developed. ‘Does planning pre-writing vs. post-writing task have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability?’

The findings of the current study indicated that using pre-writing and post-writing tasks in teaching writing especially paragraph writing could result in a better performance of language learners in paragraph writing ability but not significantly in the second experiment (post-writing group). These findings seemed to be compatible with the findings of many studies which reported that applying pre-writing and post-writing tasks is useful for EFL learners, and learners generally have a positive attitude towards using these tasks (Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004; Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998; Valvona, 2008). Further, the results of this study supported Nunan’s (1989) study who has also pointed out that the task-based instruction is a way of designing teaching syllabuses which consists of a set of communicative tasks, and a way to involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. The findings of this study is compatible with the findings of the research made by Ellis (2003) that Language classrooms strive to involve and support learners in the learning process. Instructional tasks are important components of the language learning environment, and “hold a central place” in the learning process (Ellis, 2003, “p.1”). The type of task used in instruction may positively influence learners’ performance. Hence, the curriculum or course designer tries to create tasks that foster a language learning context in which the learners can be involved and supported in their efforts to communicate fluently and effectively (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). Among the ways to create this language learning context, Task-Based Instruction (TBI) presents opportunities to employ effective and meaningful activities and thus promotes communicative language use in the language classroom.

Finally, this study confirms the remarks made by Jeon & Hahn (2009) that considering the fact that language acquisi-
tion is highly affected by the complex interactions of a number of variables, namely materials, activities, and corrective feedback, TBLT has a profound impact on these variables. It is beyond question that TBLT deal

is of paramount importance to provide learners with real opportunities to be exposed to language use in the classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of planning pre-writing versus post-writing task on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ paragraph writing ability. It was concluded that the participants performed better when they took part in a test after they were treated with pre-writing and post-writing tasks for about 10 sessions. This was further confirmed by the sub-results from testing the hypothesis, that is, the participants in the experimental groups showed a rise in their posttest scores while no significant rise in the posttest scores was shown in the control group of the study.

The Implications of the Study

Writing is a productive skill which, Nunan (1999) suggests, shares some functional characteristics with spoken discourse but also displays unique elements which are not common to both. Writing as a productive process is influenced by certain elements, such as vocabulary, grammar, organization, spelling, and punctuation. Walters (1983) considers writing as a process of construction, with the simple sentence being the basic element. By this, he means that writing is a systematic process in which mastery of one level is required before the learner may advance to the next. In addition Reid (1993), states that writing is usually easier, better and more successful when talking, drafting, revising and editing together in groups forms a core part of the writing process. According to Willis (1996), the first common phase in all task-based lessons is pre-task. It concerns the various activities that teacher and students can undertake before they start the task. The second phase is the task that centers on the task itself and various instructional options. The last common phase in task-based lessons is post task. It involves procedures for following up on the task performance. The post-task phase has three major pedagogic goals: (1) to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task; (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed; and (3) to encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task (Ellis, 2002, “pp. 93-95”). Ziahosseiny and Salehi (2007) have stated that writing is an exceedingly complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to attend to and demonstrate the control of a number of features simultaneously while converting his/her thoughts to language. To Piri, Barati, and Ketabi (2012), accuracy, organization, and fluency represent three important features of writing, the development of which entails gaining a native-like competency.

Several reasons of the importance of writing have been proposed by Sebranek (2001) as follows:

- To become a better thinker,
- To share our experience,
- To improve our performance in school,
- To shape a meaningful life.

It has been proven that writing is an effective way of communication. Furthermore, it is commonly accepted that a good writing is the result of good thinking. When students are writing, they should automatically think because they develop their ideas. The present study has significance for the learners because they become motivated, and they assume more responsibility for the writing, become more independent writers and more confident in writing. The results of the present study seem to be more practical to an Iranian context of foreign language learning particularly for those who encounter problems regarding their writing ability. Since in this study applying pre writing and post writing task is tested, it gives many opportunities to the learners and teachers to improve language instruction process not only in writing ability but also in other three skills, i.e., listening, speaking, and reading. The findings of this study may be useful and beneficial to materi-
al designers in the way that they can develop and organize new curricula for teaching language (particularly four main skills) at the universities, institutes, and schools levels.

REFERENCES


**Author Bio**

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