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## **Enhancing Students' Short Story Writing Skills in Trilingual Educational Setting**

Assessment

### **Abstract**

Developing students' narrative writing skills has always been a challenge for language teachers, especially in a multilingual educational context. The purpose of this paper is to examine ways three teachers of Kazakh, Russian, and English adopt to develop students' short-story writing using Action Research as a collaborative professional development model in Nazarbayev Intellectual School in Aktobe, Kazakhstan. The study was conducted over one academic year with 12 students of grade 9 in a single class. The research involved four Action Research cycles, conducted each term and focusing on specific scaffolding strategies, including model texts, plot diagrams, and thematic prompts. The data used to apply the intervention in each Action Research cycle in this research are drawn from three main sources: students' written papers, questionnaires that collected students' reflections, and systematic observations. Students' written works were evaluated against predefined criteria, with particular attention to plot structure, proper use of genre, style, language, and dialogue construction. The research has shown an increase in student confidence in writing a short story and reduced difficulty across all three languages, due to the aligned instructional support provided across the three language subjects. The findings suggest that applying Action Research with structured narrative scaffolding enhances students' writing skills in short stories in a multilingual setting. The limitation of this research is the sample size, due to the number of participants, a single institutional context, and the absence of a control group; the findings cannot be generalized.

*Keywords:* writing assessment, narrative writing, writing skills, trilingual education, Action Research

### **Introduction**

The greatest challenge language teachers face is developing students' writing. Since students at Nazarbayev Intellectual School (NIS) study in three languages, the development of this skill is a great concern for teachers of Kazakh, Russian, and English. The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which explicit structural scaffolding strategies—such as model texts, extended planning time, and visual plot diagrams—implemented within an Action Research framework enhance the coherence, genre adherence, and autonomy of students' short-story writing across Kazakh, Russian, and English

After reviewing several foreign scholars' works, the famous literary scholar Z. Kabdolov (2013) said, "Story is a difficult genre. First, the size is small. It requires the author to be as compact as possible. At the same time, the episode should be attractive, and the storyline should be interesting to attract the reader"(p.212). According to Al-Souki (2001), writing is a complex logical process that involves creating ideas (as cited in Alodwan &

Ibnian, 2014). In his study, Pardede (2021) states that there is no single, definite formula for using short stories effectively in EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, several principles can guide their application in pedagogy. Short stories may support language acquisition by implementing the BDA reading framework, the language-based model, and the literature-as-personal-enrichment model. In research on writing short stories (Fitri et al., 2024), presentation-based storytelling activities promote confidence, creativity, narrative competence, and critical thinking, while also supporting vocabulary development and cultural awareness, especially in contexts with limited English exposure, such as Islamic boarding schools. Beyond formal lessons, short-story initiatives can extend into extracurricular programs, competitions, and digital platforms, fostering sustained engagement with literacy and creative expression. Thus, enhancing student motivation and learning exposure. Writing is loosely coupled with speaking; at the same time, it has been noted to differ in production time and in the distance between the writer and the reader in both time and space (as cited in Weigle, 2017). Second-language writers use the same writing process as in their first; however, they tend to focus more on the language rather than on the content. Moreover, they usually transfer their first-language knowledge into their writing style in other languages. Generating the text in a second language may be complicated by the need for specific vocabulary and syntactic choices. As a result, the result may differ from what the writer expected. Besides, second-language writers might be less effective in writing because of limited social and cultural factors, since they are less aware of the norms expected by the reader. According to the Hayes-Flower model (as cited in Weigle, 2017, p. 23), the writing process is not linear, but recursive, which means that instruction in the writing process may be more effective than presented models. It should be noted that the Hayes-Flower model is based on first-language writers. Hayes' writing model (as cited in Weigle, 2017, p.28 ) highlights the value of reading as a central process in writing. The researcher emphasizes students' ability to memorize the task, the required genre, and topic knowledge, as well as linguistic knowledge, to carry it out. Topic knowledge is important for writers to write about a given theme.

## **Methods**

The research was conducted throughout the academic year 2023-2024, with the participation of three language teachers specializing in Kazakh, English, and Russian, specifically focusing on grade 9A, a class of 12 students. The present study utilizes the Action Research (Koshi, 2009) approach to answer the main research question: 'How can we develop students' writing skills in Kazakh, Russian, and English using structural templates and samples?' To answer this research question, data were collected through systematic observation, questionnaires, and students' written papers. For systematic observation, three students were selected (Koshi, 2009) by academic level: A-the strongest, B-the middle level, and C-the weakest. A structured, pre-determined observation protocol was designed based on Hayes-Flower's (as cited in Weghles, 2017) writing model, focusing on planning, drafting, and revising behaviour, and engagement during the writing process.

We analyzed qualitative data from student reflections to explore the barriers to achieving a higher standard of writing, the effectiveness of the scaffolding strategies, and

what was needed to lower those barriers. Instructional interventions were designed and implemented after each cycle based on the students' reflections and observations (Koshi, 2009). For the purpose of intervention and scaffolding, the most frequently requested items were extracted from the answers and selected as the intervention step. Additionally, key areas for improvement were continuously refined to meet the needs of all students, including Students A, B, and C (Koshi, 2009). A set of anonymized questionnaires was completed after each Action Research cycle. All participants were asked to indicate the most difficult parts of the writing, assess the task's difficulty based on their level, and suggest scaffolding strategies to improve their writing. Prior to data collection, all three language teachers agreed on the same assessment criteria for the writing to be used across the four cycles of the Action Research (Koshi, 2009). It included the following writing assessment criteria:

- ✓ Vocabulary- use of vivid descriptive language
- ✓ Writing style- Use of appropriate style
- ✓ Writing format- use of appropriate genre
- ✓ Character – creation of well-rounded characters
- ✓ Plot- Plot structure follows “Hook-Conflict-Resolution” structure
- ✓ Dialogues- Create natural dialogues that reveal the character

The initial task involved measuring the students' short-story writing abilities (Table 1). The second cycle involved reading a sample short story before writing. In addition to instructional intervention, we allocated more time to writing, as most of our students requested in their survey.

**Table 1**

*Short Story Writing Tasks by Term*

<b>Task Type</b>	<b>Term 1</b>	<b>Term 2</b>	<b>Term 3</b>	<b>Term 4</b>
	Write a short story related to the idea of a "global village"	Read the sample and write a short story about climate change.	Write a short story on the topic of the environment using a plot diagram to structure the narrative.	Write a short story on the topic of environmental issues.

During the third cycle of writing, students were given a plot diagram during the planning process to structure their writing. During the final fourth cycle, students did not receive any support, just instructions. This was done to test the durability of the instructional impact and to examine whether students could autonomously apply the plot diagram, vocabulary strategies, and planning techniques in unsupported writing performance.

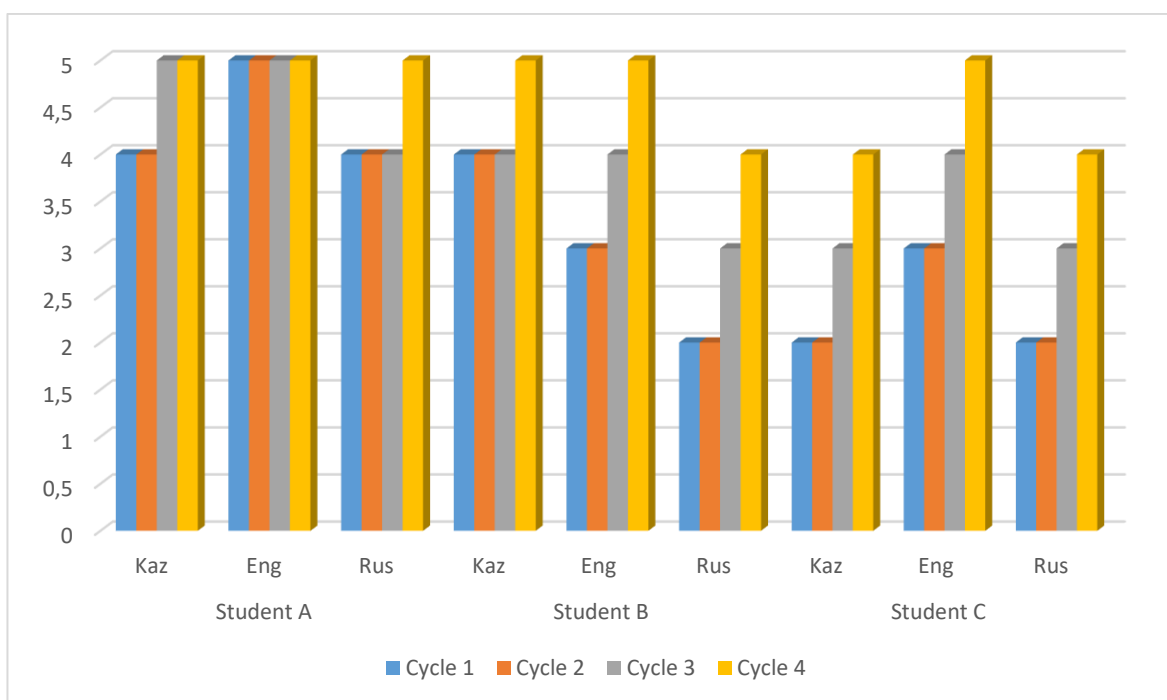
**Findings**

The findings are presented across the four Action Research cycles , with emphasis on students’ writing progression, the instructional interventions, and cross-linguistic assessment, observations, and students’ feedback.

*Collecting primary data (Cycle 1)*

The pre-test, completed before the intervention, showed uneven competence across all three languages. However, Student A demonstrated consistent, strong performance in short-story writing in English across all four cycles of the Action Research interventions. Whilst Student B and C showed fragmented plot structures, limited competence in language use, and weak dialogue construction. It was revealed that across all three languages, using coherent plot organization was the most challenging for all the learners. Observational data indicated minimal engagement in planning, as students began writing without outlining. The questionnaire responses unveiled students’ uncertainty about how to structure the short story. Besides, learners complained about the time limit.

**Table 2**  
*Overall findings across three languages by terms*



*The impact of model texts and extension time (Cycle2)*

Having analyzed pre-test writing, observations, and student feedback, we decided to suggest a model text and extend the planning time. Measurable improvements were observed in students’ narrative writing completeness and observance of genre conventions. Students produced more logically structured stories with more clear beginnings and endings. However, according to the 5-scale assessment agreed to be used across all three language teachers, their writing was still at the same level across all three languages, which was also supported by the

observation result, since students were still struggling with non-systematic planning. The students' feedback showed that reading a sample clarified the expectations for the structure of short-story writing. These findings suggest that exposure to model texts increases structural awareness, though, despite using adequate vocabulary, it still lacked vivid descriptive quality.

#### *Impact of plot diagram (Cycle 3)*

The introduction of a visual plot diagram during the pre-writing stage resulted in the most substantial structural improvements. According to the observation protocol there was a shift in all three students' behaviour, engaging in independent, confident planning. Notably, Students B and C demonstrated a clearer understanding of conflict development and resolution, improving their writing results on the 5-scale assessment in three languages. The questionnaire gains were most pronounced in plot coherence and logical sequencing. The use of dialogue in these stories was smoothly integrated and more closely connected to character development, rather than being mechanically inserted to meet the required criteria.

#### *Autonomous writing (Cycle 4)*

In the final cycle of assessing students' autonomy and durability of learning, we decided to withdraw from scaffolding and interventions. Students were not provided with any scaffolding strategies. According to the final results, all three students demonstrate maintained performance rather than regression. The narrative arc remained structured, and the use of subject-specific vocabulary and dialogues were relevant. The observation showed that students were confident and independent in organizing their ideas in ways consistent to the previous scaffolding.

#### *Development across assessment criteria and languages*

The most significant improvement across the assessment criteria occurred in plot structure, adherence to the genre, and character development. Moderate improvements were observed in the use of vivid vocabulary and the naturalness of dialogue. Stylistic sophistication showed the least change, remaining more language specific. Short-story writing proficiency in all three languages grows in parallel, despite differing initial proficiency levels. Once there was an improvement in one language, similar improvements occurred in the others. According to the questionnaire results, difficulty decreased across cycles. In other words, by the final, they reported that nothing was difficult for them. Initially, students had difficulty with organization; by Cycle 4, concerns shifted towards enhancing vocabulary, showing progression from structural to stylistic awareness.

Overall, the data demonstrate that structured narrative scaffolding within Action Research framework contributed to improved trilingual short-story writing, with evidence of transfer and autonomous use of planning strategies.

### **Discussion**

An initial objective of the research was to identify ways to improve students' narrative writing skills in a multilingual setting by using collaborative scaffolding strategies within the Action Research framework. The results of this study show clear progress in students' short

story writing across all three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English, over the four Action Research cycles. One interesting finding is that the improvement was not immediate, but after the introduction of the plot diagram rather than exposure to model texts in Cycle 3, suggesting that explicit structural scaffolding had a stronger impact on coherence than passive exposure to exemplars. This may indicate that students need to understand the structure and logic of the writing rather than relying solely on completed models. Understanding the logic of the text makes the narrative structure visible and could be transferred to all three languages in question. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference between students' writing performance across the three languages by the final cycle, despite their differing initial proficiency levels. The Russian language was more difficult at the outset, especially for Students B and C; improvement occurred by the final cycle. By the final fourth Cycle, there was an improvement in structuring the story and in using the subject-specific vocabulary across all three languages, suggesting that high-order narrative skills developed through structured scaffolding transferred across the three languages. These outcomes are in line with Kabdolov's (2013) opinion that writing a short story requires a concise structure and well-organized plot. In accordance with the previous study by Weigle (2017), students were more inclined to focus on form rather than content when writing in the second and third languages. Over time, by the final Cycle, transfer across languages appeared, suggesting that planning strategies developed in one language helped improve writing in others. This finding is consistent with that of the Hayes-Flower model (as cited in Weigle, 2017), which holds that writing is repetitive, with planning, drafting, and revising recursive processes. Besides, these results align with Pardede's (2021) findings that teaching through short stories can boost narrative skills and confidence, though confidence in this study is more closely related to the writing process than to public speaking. Students reported feeling more confident and comfortable with writing in their feedback towards the end of the Action Research cycle.

A note of caution is warranted here because the sample size is small, there is no control group, and exposure to similar tasks across the three languages over one academic year may not generalize to other educational contexts. Therefore, although the progressions appear consistent, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific, given that the research design follows Action Research framework.

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