

Helping EFL Students Improve their Writing

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It is nice to say: “Let them write about what they like,”
But how if writing they do not like?

Abstract

The present research has been carried out in the English Department at the College of Education for Women, Baghdad University to diagnose 2nd year EFL students’ deficiencies in writing so as to improve their performance via a range of repeated writing activities. The researcher applied a one-group design of pre- and post-tests in order to statistically measure the difference of the means of students’ scores. The results show that the difference is significant.

Keywords: Writing Improvement. EFL College students

1. Introduction

Writing well is really a big challenge for both native and non-native students. In general, it is much bigger with the students of English as a foreign language. Students nowadays have very little interest in writing which is so important to fulfil the education requirements. This may be due to technology progress which has its negative effect on students’ skills of writing because of the availability of ready-made assignments. Moreover, teachers have adopted the belief that writing is a kind of communication; this has led them to focus on the subject itself and overlook the incorrect style of writing. Feeling that students have no inclination to writing due to their weakness in it has been the impetus for the researcher to do the current study.

2. Problem of the study

The continual disappointment of students due to their failure to express themselves well in writing may lead to loss of creativity. This may concern not only the subject of composition writing but also all the other academic subjects which definitely require students to achieve good academic writing in order to succeed. Regarding Iraqi students, the problem of their poor writing is multiplied due to the years of blockade, chronicle instability, lack of writing assignments and practice from the early years of their learning. The study is a trial to recover this lack.

Since the prime duty of the English Department, College of Education for Women, is to supply schools with qualified teachers of English language, the researcher - as a composition instructor - considers that improving the students’ writing is badly needed; graduates should be skilled and qualified enough to be able to teach the basics of writing. The researcher has diagnosed several shortcomings which have covered most of the basics of good writing among which are paragraphing, ideas, grammar, spelling, punctuation and handwriting. Students should have mastered these basics before joining the college where they could direct their attention and efforts to learn how to analyze, synthesize assignments and critically respond to new information (Irvin, L.Lennie,2010: 7).The study describes the experiment that the researcher has followed in order to help the students improve their writing.

3. Importance of the study

Academic writing assignments require students to master the knowledge of good writing. Evaluation judgments of the different fields of learning are mainly based upon writing. Students who are skilled in writing can get better grades than those who are unskilled. Thus, the basics of good writing should be taught and practiced from the early years of learning.

4. Aims of the study

The study aims at helping 2nd year university EFL students improve their writing and avoid the common shortcomings of basics of composition writing. The main focuses are on

- 4.1 writing meaningful and grammatical sentences,
- 4.2 choosing a suitable topic sentence and developing it with supporting ones,
- 4.3 logical arrangements of ideas and coherent paragraphs,
- 4.4 correct usage of punctuation,
- 4.5 writing with no spelling or handwriting mistakes.

5. Hypotheses of the study

It is hypothesized that students

- 5.1 hate writing assignments because of the continual disappointment due to the failure to write correctly,
- 5.2 would show higher scores in the post-test results than that of the pre-test results due to the methodology adopted by the current study.

6. Limits of the study

The study has been limited to teach writing through using the textbook 'College Composition' by Fakhir A. Razzak and Helen Al-Hassan with emphasis on the basics of writing. The study has also been limited to the students of the 2nd year of the English Department, College of Education for Women, Baghdad University.

7. Definition of Terms

- 7.1 **EFL students** are the students studying English as a foreign language who are included in the current study.
- 7.2 **Writing** refers to academic formal writing.

8. Previous Literature

Arikan, DrArda (2012) carried out a study aiming at reporting an experimental syllabus design used in a writing skills course at the department of English Language Teaching at a Turkish University. The study depended on the constructivist theory with the concentration on the reflective writing through discussion, peer reviewing, and journal reading activities.

Farrah, Dr Mohammed Abdel Hakim's study (2011) aimed at enhancing the attitudes of writing skills through using collaborative learning with the EFL Palestinian University English Department students. The results had indicated positive attitudes towards collaborative learning.

Henze, Rosemary's project (2006) was conducted to reveal the importance of "effective feedback" to the faculty members of San Jose State University, and enhance the ability to provide effective feedback on students' writing for its improvement.

Huang, Julie Tzu-Ling's research (2012) was a study of the individual responses of four eighth-grade Chinese speaking students at a middle school. It examined their react to their instructor's feedback on structured assignments of five-paragraph essay writing.

Kellog and Raulerson (2013) reviewed some facts on the importance of cognitive control in writing skill, and presented the elements of deliberate practice in the training of college-level writers and evidence of their importance. It also discussed the difficulties of fulfilling deliberate practice in writing instruction.

Liou, Hsien-Chin; Wang, Samuel H.; Hung-Yeh, Yuli (2012) carried out a research report on a one year session which concentrated on the activity of CALL usage in helping the instruction of EFL writing in Taiwan. The study focused on the implementation of CALL courseware via using 10 lessons of grammar exercises.

McMullen, Maram George's research (2009) studied the use of language learning strategies by Saudi Arabia students - learners of English as a foreign language. It showed the potential advantages of strategy instruction to Saudi students.

Peha, Steve's study (2003) started with showing the problem of choosing a topic and proceeded to give teachers some strategies guide to help them in their task. Among these strategies were: using Topic T-Chart showing, for example, advantages and disadvantages to compare, starting with what one knew, loved, and topics that were related to the curriculum. Ward, Deirdre's Ph. D. qualitative case study (2011) showed that 27% of the 5th grade US students did not meet the writing requirements of the state. In this study, six teachers had volunteered to present authentic writing lessons. The results revealed a significant difference in the quality of writing due to the students' personal engagement.

9. Methodology

The researcher had adopted the following steps to improve the level of the target students who had shown weakness in writing skill:

- 9.1 Drawing the students' attention to the necessity of redeveloping the basics of their writing.
- 9.2 Dividing them into groups to encourage cooperation and create competition among them.
- 9.3 Involving them in a number of practical writing exercises.
- 9.4 Giving them feedback.
- 9.5 Dedicating the first fifteen minutes of each period to quick revision.

10. The Instruction Procedures

The researcher adopted the experimental-one group design of a pre-test and a post-test in order to evaluate the experiment. She thought that the mentioned design was suitable for the current research purpose and hypotheses. Each period usually lasted for one and a half hour. The first fifteen minutes were dedicated to remind the students with the previous subject by quick revision. Then, a half hour was dedicated to explain a new piece of information with examples. A half hour later was associated with familiar titles for students to write topics using the newly explained information. The last fifteen minutes of the period were associated with the teacher's feedback concentrating on the basics of writing.

11. The Research Sample

The study was applied on the second year students of the English Department, College of Education for Women, Baghdad University, in the first term of the academic year 2011-2012. The population totaled to 150 students who were distributed into five sections. According to the scores of the pre-test, the researcher chose 45 students- all of whom are EFL students-distributed into two sections to be the sample of the study.

12. The Research Tools

After reviewing some literature concerning the criteria used for the measurement of writing, the researcher prepared some kind of rubric and submitted it to a jury of experts to judge its validity for the proposed purpose. The jury agreed upon the rubric given on (Table 1) to assess the basics of the students' writing.

13. The Cognitive Aspects of Writing

Starting from the very beginning of the study, the researcher tried to attract the students' attention to the importance of the following aspects of affective writing:

13.1 Paragraphing: It is important to avoid too much eye strain. A piece of writing has to be interesting to attract the reader to new pieces of information. A good paragraph is achieved when a topic sentence is intelligently chosen; the knowledge of choosing a good topic sentence for each paragraph helps students arrange the sequence of their information in a logical order.

13.2 Ideas: They are the soul of writing. One cannot achieve writing without ideas. The first step of writing is to choose a topic sentence which is the controlling idea. The controlling idea could be an effective beginning which attracts the attention of readers (Peha, 2003:7). The next step is to develop the controlling idea. To be explicit, ideas should logically be arranged and coherently connected to each other. Thus, readers can easily understand the presented information and get interest in it.

13.3 Grammar and spelling: They are essential for communicating correct and clear meaning. Abbot (2007:6) states that a clear thinking could not be written clearly without using words according to definite rules. Moats (2005:1) show the importance of spelling for writing and say that some writers restrict their writing to the only words that they know. In some specialties like medicine, law, and commerce, misused grammar or spelling may often cause problems and terrible losses.

13.4 Punctuation: Betham (2011, 37) points out that "Punctuation is more important than spelling". Punctuation marks give meaning to words as pauses and change in tone of speech do. Several studies have revealed that punctuation marks may change the meaning of words if they are incorrectly used, and they may reveal mystery when they are correctly used.

13.5 Handwriting: In business, you might be impressed by one's personality through her/his handwriting. For students, handwriting is a reason of failure or success because teachers do not waste time to decipher what a student has written. Readability of letters and good spacing between words and within the word lead to legible handwriting. Moreover, the right direction of drawing letters without lifting the pencil helps accelerate writing. Children who are slow writers find it difficult to transfer the information held in their memory for they may forget it before achieving of transference into writing (Rosenblum et al., 2003).

Focusing on the cognitive and practical aspects of the basics of writing mentioned above, the researcher followed some steps that can be summarized as follows:

- A pre-test had been conducted to measure the students' efficiency in the basics of writing.
- Students had been divided into nine groups; the five students of each group had been asked to work cooperatively in order to compete with other groups.
- Concentrating on the cognitive and practical aspects, the researcher explained the different types of sentences with examples and exercises and showed students how to choose the most suitable one for their writing.
- Choosing a topic sentence, paragraphing, and qualities of a good paragraph and formation of good ideas.
- Using different kinds of punctuation.
- Students were asked to do exercises on each single item of information directly after explaining it.
- The first fifteen minutes of each class were dedicated for a quick revision for the previous subject; students were asked to give examples.
- Following up the students' handwritten performance, the researcher continuously gave feedback on their assignments and exercises.
- At the end of the term, the students were given a post-test to measure how much information they had retained.

14. Analysis and Results

After scoring both the pre-test and post-test, the researcher had to analyze the results in order to measure the difference between the results of the two tests. T-test was also used to find out whether or not difference is significant. Table 2 illustrates the results concerning the mean, standard deviation (SD), T test (T), the degree of freedom (d.f.) and significant difference (sig).

- The mean score of paragraphing on the pre-test is (1.69) whereas it is (2.31) on the post-test. The T. test calculated is (5.585) at the level of (.000) significance.
- The mean score of ideas on the pre-test is (1.58) whereas it is (2.00) on the post-test. The T. test calculated is (3.759) at the level of (.000) significance.
- The mean score of grammar and spelling on the pre-test is (1.02) whereas it is (1.16) on the post-test. The T. test calculated is (2.211) at the level of (.032) significance.
- The mean score of punctuation on the pre-test is (1.42) whereas it is (2.04) on the post-test. The T. test calculated is (4.243) at the level of (.000) significance.
- The mean score of handwriting on the pre-test is (1.93) whereas it is (2.36) on the post-test. The T. test calculated is (3.617) at the level of (.001) significance.
- The mean score of total on the pre-test is (7.64) whereas it is (9.91) on the post-test. The T. test calculated is (13.625) at the level of (.000) significance.

The above mentioned results show the effectiveness of the experimental way of repetition, competition and practice with feedback on helping students improve their writing.

15. Conclusion

Since the sentence is considered essential to build a piece of writing, it is important to explain it at the beginning of the course. In the light of the results of the scoring analysis, the researcher thinks that explaining a single item at a time directly followed by assignments and exercises has a very important impact on helping students improve their writing. In addition, the study has shown the effectiveness of the following strategies:

- 15.1 Focusing on dividing students into groups and building cooperation between them.
- 15.2 Creating challenges among students in order to compete with each other.

- 15.3 Giving students feedback in order that they could diagnose their shortcomings and later on correct themselves.

16. Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:

- 16.1 The establishment of a writing center to improve students' basics of writing.
- 16.2 Holding continuous sessions to involve students in a series of writing assignments and exercises.
- 16.3 Using the internet to help students improve their writing.
- 16.4 Creating challenges among students and offering a prize for the best group.

17. Suggestions for Further Reading

In the light of the results of the current research, the researcher suggests the following readings:

- 17.1 A research on the effectiveness of ESL teaching for writing improvement in the elementary and secondary schools.
- 17.2 Similar experimental studies to improve creativity in writing.
- 17.3 The relationship between handwriting, comprehension and memory.
- 17.4 The role of writing centers in universities.

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**Appendix: 1
Tables**

Category	Criteria				Points
	1	2	3	4	
Paragraphs	The 1 st word is not indented and no paragraphing.	The 1 st word is indented, and/or paragraphing needs some work.	Paragraphing is done but it is not well-constructed.	Paragraphs are complete and well-constructed.	
Ideas	Ideas seem to be a collection of unrelated sentences. They are very difficult to figure out what the passage is about, or they only contain repeated sentences.	Ideas are somewhat organized, but are not very clear. It takes more than one reading to figure out what the passage is about.	Ideas are expressed in a pretty clear manner, but the organization could be better.	Ideas are expressed in a clear and organized fashion. It is easy to figure out what the passage is about.	
Grammar & spelling	More than 4 errors in grammar and/or spelling.	3-4 errors in grammar and/or spelling	1-2 errors in grammar and/or spelling.	No errors in grammar or spelling.	
Punctuation	There is no concern for capitalization and full stops.	3-4 errors in capitalization and full stops.	1-2 errors of capitalization and full stops.	A clear concern for capitalization and full stops	
Handwriting	More than 4 letters are incorrectly written.	3-4 letters are incorrectly written.	1-2 letters are incorrectly written.	Letters are clearly and correctly written.	

**Table 1
Rating Rubric**

Criteria	Test	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Paragraphing	Pre-test	1.69	.596	5.585	44	.000
	Post-Test	2.31	.733			
Ideas	Pre-test	1.58	.621	3.759	44	.000
	Post-Test	2.00	.603			
Grammar & Spelling	Pre-test	1.02	.149	2.211	44	.032
	Post-Test	1.16	.424			
Punctuation	Pre-test	1.42	.657	4.243	44	.000
	Post-Test	2.04	.706			
Handwriting	Pre-test	1.93	.688	3.617	44	.001
	Post-Test	2.36	.743			
Total	Pre-test	7.64	1.448	13.625	44	.000
	Post-Test	9.91	1.411			

**Table 2
Analysis of Results**

Appendix 2: Samples of a Student's Pre & Post Tests.
Students were asked to write briefly on a story they have read.

Mrs. Amira is a hard working mother.
She wakes up in the morning and
she makes a breakfast for her family and children.
After that she goes to the work in the school.
After that she finish her work in the school. Mrs.
Amira is going to home and begin to
make the lunch for children and after that she
teach children and study till the evening.
She goes to sleep at 11:00
night.

-Mr. pontellier ~~return~~ returned from Klein's hotel at eleven o'clock. He was in an exact humor in raise spirits, and very talkative. His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and quickly asleep, when he came in. He talked to her, whereas he undressed, telling her bits of news and gossip that he had collected during the day. From his trousers pockets. He took a fistful of bank notes and a best deal of silver coin, keys, knife, ~~handker~~ handkerchief, and whatever else happened to be in his pockets. She was fall ~~into~~ sleep, and answered him with few half utterances,