

The Effect of Using the Process Approach to Writing on Developing University Students' Essay Writing Skills in EFL

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effect of using the process approach to writing on developing university students' essay writing skills. The study attempted to answer the following two questions:

- 1-What are the essay writing skills needed for university students in EFL?
- 2- What is the effect of using the process approach to writing on developing university students' essay writing skills in EFL?

Results of the study showed that the process approach to writing had positively affected the students' essay writing skills in EFL. Based on results of the study, the researchers recommended placing more emphasis on teaching writing as a process not only as a product. The researchers also recommended attaching more emphasis on the pre- writing stage due to its vital role in the writing process.

Keywords: the Process Approach to Writing, Essay Writing, EFL, Jordan

1.1. Introduction

Language is one of the most important areas of human development. It is a vital tool for communicating thoughts and ideas.

Language educators point out that language involves four basic skills, namely; listening, speaking, reading and writing. The skills are related to each other by two parameters:

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1- The mode of communication:

- Oral skills (listening and speaking)
- Written skills (reading and writing)

2- The direction of communication:

- Receptive skills (listening and reading)
- Productive skills (speaking and writing)

Raimes (1983) indicated that when we learn a second language, we learn to communicate with other people to understand them, talk to them, read what they have written and write to them. "An integral part of participating fully in a new cultural setting is learning how to communicate when the other person is not right in front of us, listening to our words and looking at our gestures and facial expression.

As for the skill of writing, Banat (2007) pointed out that this skill is invaluable for helping students communicate and understand how the parts of language go together, adding that writing is one of the four major language skills that need to be mastered by language learners.

Thus, intensive efforts have been exerted by researchers and educators to study the nature of this skill as well as the best methods that can be followed to teach it effectively and communicatively.

Writing is no longer viewed as a simple linear activity consisting of several stages that are independent and sequenced. In contrast, writing is now recognized as a complex and integrated set of processes that are interactive and recursive. Al Souqi (2001) noted that writing involves the creation of ideas as well as the ability to express them logically and coherently.

Moreover, Abu- Jaleel (2001) argued that writing is a more recursive activity in which the writer moves backwards and forwards between drafting and revising, with stages of re- planning in between.

In addition, Conley (1995) pointed out that writing makes our thoughts and experiences vivid and long lasting and helps us learn things in every subject area. "In many ways, writing is the way we make sense of our world".

According to Zamel (1983), writing is a process through which students can explore and discover their thoughts constructing meaning and assessing it at the same time. Attention is paid first to the content and meaning and then to the form.

Consequently, helping learners master the skill of writing and enabling them to write effectively and interactively is one of the main objectives of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), especially that the communicative goals top priorities of the current trends in English language teaching field.

Lindsay (2000) noted that producing a coherent, fluent, and extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing to do in language regardless whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign.

Within this framework, studies conducted in this field suggested innovative techniques and strategies for teaching English in general and writing in particular, especially that the traditional English language programs regard writing as a means of language study more than as a means of communicating ideas.

Thus, the current study comes to investigate the effectiveness of using the process approach to writing on developing university students' short story writing skills.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The problem of the study could be stated in the low level of university students in Jordan in essay writing in EFL.

Consequently, the present study attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1-What are the essay writing skills needed for university students in EFL?
- 2- What is the effect of using the process approach to writing on developing university students' essay writing skills in EFL?

1.3. Aims of the Study

The current study aimed at:

- Identifying essay writing skills needed for university students in EFL.
- Developing Jordanian university students' essay writing skills in EFL.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The current study is expected to help in the following areas:

- Providing curriculum planners with the essay writing skills needed to be taken into consideration while planning EFL curriculum.
- Providing university instructors with suitable strategies and approaches for developing students' essay writing skills in EFL.
- Developing university students writing skills in EFL
- Paving the way for other researchers to conduct further studies on developing students' writing skills.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

- 1 -The study was confined to developing students' essay writing skills.
- 2- The study was confined to non-English major university students studying at the World Islamic Sciences and Education University.
- 3-The study was conducted in the summer semester 2011- 2012 one semester, ten meetings, 50 minutes each.

1.6. Sample of the Study

The sample of the study consisted of 90 non-English major students classified into two classes, one served as an experimental group and the other one as control.

The students were assigned randomly from English 101 sections at the World Islamic Sciences and Education University.

1.7. Tools of the Study

- 1- A checklist (to identify the essay writing skills needed for non-English majors students in EFL)
- 2- A pre- post essay writing test and its scoring scale.

1.8. Variables of the Study

- 1- The independent variable :
 - The process approach to develop students' essay writing skills in EFL
- 2- The dependent variables:
 - Performance of the experimental group on the essay writing post- test.

1.9. Method of the Study

- 1- The study followed the descriptive method in collecting data on writing skills in general, essay writing skills in EFL in particular.
- 2- The study also followed the quasi- experimental design. Two groups were chosen from English 101 sections at the World Islamic Sciences and Education University in Amman. One served as an experimental group and the other one as control. The researcher administered a pre- post test to the experimental and control groups to test the effect of using the process approach to writing , which was applied to the experimental group.

1.10. Definition of Terms

- The process approach to writing:

Tribble (1996) defines the 'process approach' as 'an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models'.

- Essay : A piece of writing which is often written from an author's personal point of view.

2. Review of Related Literature

A number of studies related to the implementation of the process approach in teaching writing have been conducted in different educational areas related to language teaching in different parts of the world.

Ho (2006) investigated how effective process writing is in helping about 200 students at the upper primary school level and the lower primary school level improve their writing skills and their attitudes towards writing. Six primary school teachers, three in the lower primary school level and three in the upper primary school level, each implemented an innovative two-month process writing programme in their schools.

The effectiveness of the programme was investigated through post-interviews and the comparison of a pre- and post-questionnaire, a pre-test and a post-test, and pre- and post- observations of the strategies used by the students in both their pre-tests and post-tests. It is found that the programme brought about positive results across all classes and in both the upper and lower levels, though the results in each classroom differed slightly.

Goldstein and Carr (1996) examined the 1992 NAEP writing assessment administered to a representative national sample of approximately 7,000 4th grade students, 11,000 8th grade students and 11,500 12th grade students across the USA. Results indicate that process-related activities are strongly related to writing proficiency.

Mahon and Yau (1992), after launching a process-oriented writing programme for a primary two class with thirty-five students, found that students' writing ability improved by adopting the process approach to writing. Cheung and Chan (1994) carried out a writing programme in a primary school in Hong Kong. They also found that the process writing approach successfully helped the students develop their writing skills.

According to the traditional programs in EFL teaching, learners are taught writing with a focus on producing correct language rather than on selecting, organizing and presenting ideas for effective communication with a reader.

Berkenkotter (2001) indicated that when adapting strategies for writers, we need to consider the following assumptions:

- 1- Effective writing requires an awareness of the relationship between subject, purpose, and audience.
- 2- A writer has literally dozens of constraints to juggle simultaneously, among them lexical and syntactic decision, tone, and organization.
- 3- Writing under the pressure of too many constraints frequently creates "writers' block". It is necessary to break the composing process down into a number of sub-processes which include setting goals, making plans, generating ideas, and organizing the ideas into some kind of structure easily accessible to a particular audience.

Kenyon (1988) stated that significant changes are being made in writing classrooms, new strategies such as problem solving are proving effective in bringing passive students into the learning process in an active way and increasing the efficiency of their learning.

Ababneh (1996) and Al Abed Al Haq (1994) noted that students' inability to write a comprehensive, acceptable English passage is due to the methods used in EFL teaching in general and composition in particular. They criticized the over- emphasis on grammatical and lexical accuracy, correct spelling and the use of mechanics at the expense of the macro level and organization skills, indicating that the over- emphasis on structural and linguistic components at the expense of rhetorical components has been one of the major causes behind students' poor achievement in writing.

Darayseh (2003) noted that teaching writing no longer means simply having students do grammar exercises in writing or getting writing which is free from grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes, instead, we are after writing about what students are interested in and what they really want to communicate to the reader, and how they reach their final writing products. Thus, with this view in mind, the traditional methods of teaching writing are ineffective. The emphasis now is on the process (a series of steps) which students follow to get the final product.

The most two popular methods of teaching writing to non-native speakers are: The Product Approach and the Process Approach. The product approach focuses on the end result of writing.

Abu- Jaleel (2001) noted that "the main assumption of this approach is that students have specific needs either for instructional writing or for personal writing, so the emphasis here is on sentence structure, grammar, and the mechanics of writing such as spelling and punctuation.

On the other hand, Oshima and Hogue (1991) indicated that writing is a thinking process which demands intellectual effort that has to be sustained over a period of time. They viewed the process approach to writing as an enabling approach in which the writer engages in the creative process of shaping their raw materials into coherent message and work towards an acceptable and appropriate form for expressing them.

The process approach takes the stance that language teaching should be concerned more with what the learner wants to say. The learner's interaction or purpose becomes of paramount importance. Thus, the learner is seen to have a role as initiator, not a mere responder or a mimicker of other people's intentions and expressions. Kirby and Liner (1988) pointed out that the process writing approach helps teachers to understand what writers go through while they are writing, so teachers can help them bring those 'mind texts ' to the page.

Smith (2000) and Wyse and Jones (2001) stated the main features of the process approach as follows:

- It includes a variety of writing models, expressive as well as expository.
- It emphasizes writing conferences in which the teacher sits with the students as they are writing and offers advice on how to progress.
- Writing normally takes place through a series of multiple drafts.
- Writing should be a cooperative activity; students assist one another composing texts.
- Errors are considered natural and are corrected in the final stages.
- Teachers respond to students' drafts with fewer judgment and more questions and suggestions.
- Grammar is learned in the context of writing for communication.

- It emphasizes revision as critical to the writing process as teachers give their students opportunities to review, clarify, and re organize what they have written.

On the other hand, research and studies conducted in the writing field showed that the process approach to writing includes a number of steps as follows: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

1- Pre- writing: The pre- writing stage, or the planning stage, aims at preparing students to write and generate ideas. Harp and Brewer (1996) pointed out that this stage is based on a number of steps such as determining the topic and the audience as well as activating student's previous knowledge through brainstorming and other activities.

In this stage, students may listen to a text related to the topic, read about the topic, watch a film or even describe a picture about the topic.

Richard (1992) pointed out that the more time students spend on pre- writing activities, the more successful their writing will be. Al Abed (1992) asserted that "the pr- writing stage encourages effective writing because it prompts originality, creativity, and personal awareness" .

2- Drafting: In this stage, students are supposed to write down their ideas on paper focusing on content not mechanics. Gaber (2003) pointed out that when writing their first draft, students should not expect perfection or even work towards it. The first draft should be considered as a further means of discovering ideas and what one wants to do.

3- Revising: Revising is viewed as looking at organization, main points, support for main ideas, examples, and connections between ideas.

Noskin (2000) pointed out that revising is considered the heart of the writing process, the means by which ideas emerge and evolve and meanings are clarified. Moreover, Manzo and Manzo (1995) argued that revising should be viewed as a thinking process that helps students refine ideas, discover new connections and explore them more deeply in an attempt to best communicate their ideas with an audience.

4- Editing: Once they have revised their writing, students move to the editing stage so as to come up with the final version.

Editing could be viewed as the process of correcting spelling and grammar in a piece of writing. This occurs after the revision process has been completed and just prior to the publishing phase.

This stage may include the following:

- Checking and correcting spelling
- Checking and correcting grammar
- Correcting punctuation

Furthermore, the editing stage may also include a kind of revision, especially that in the process approach to writing, revision is a recursive process and can occur at any point in the writing process.

5- Publishing: This is the final stage of the writing process. In this stage the writings that were revised and edited carefully may be published. There are different ways for publishing students' writing such as:

The use of classroom newspapers and magazines.

- 1- The teacher may put students' written products on walls and in halls.
- 2- Students can read their writings aloud to the class.

Poindexter and Oliver (1999) noted that the purpose of publishing is to share and celebrate students' finished products. By sharing their writing, students develop sensitivity to an audience and confidence in themselves as authors.

3. Procedures of the Study

To answer questions of the study, the following procedures were followed:

- 1- To answer the first question: "What are the essay writing skills needed for university students in EFL?" the researchers have:
 - 1- Reviewed the related literature in the field of writing in general.
 - 2- Reviewed the related literature in the field of essay writing in EFL in particular.

- 3- Designed a checklist on the essay writing skills needed for non-English major students in EFL.
- 4- Submitted the checklist to specialized jury members to identify the essay writing skills needed for university students in EFL .

2- To answer the second question: "What is the effect of using the process approach to writing on developing university students' essay writing skills in EFL?" the researchers have:

- 1- Reviewed the related literature that includes tests to measure students' writing skills in general and essay writing skills in particular.
- 2- Prepared the pre- post test.
- 3- Submitted the test to specialized jury members to ensure its validity and made the necessary modifications in the light of their observations.
- 4- Ensured the reliability of the test.
- 5- Chosen a random sample (control and experimental groups).
- 6- Administered the essay writing pre- test to both groups.
- 7- Applied the process approach to writing on the experimental group.
- 8- Administered the essay writing post- test to both groups.
- 9- Collected and analyzed data.
- 10- Discussed the results of the study.
- 11- Introduced recommendations and suggestions for further research.

4. Tools of the Study

4.1. The Essay Writing Skills Checklist

4.1.1. Purpose of the Checklist

The checklist aimed at identifying the essay writing skills necessary for university students.

4.1.2. Content of the Checklist

Having reviewed the related literature on developing students' writing skills, the researchers designed a checklist on essay writing skills needed for university students.

4.1.3. Validity of the Checklist

The checklist was submitted to specialized jury members in the field of curriculum and instruction (TEFL) so as to determine the degree of importance of each skill on the checklist.

The jury members stated that the skills included in the checklist were generally adequate and appropriate to its purpose. Still, some skills were deleted. Some of the jury members suggested other skills to be added to the checklist.

The checklist was modified according to the jury members' suggestions to be as follows:

- 1- Clarity of ideas.
- 2- Relevant supporting details.
- 3- Dividing the essay into introduction, body and conclusion.
- 4- Moving smoothly from introduction to body to conclusion.
- 5- Well- organized paragraphs.
- 6- Logically- sequenced ideas.
- 7- Punctuation.
- 8- Spelling.
- 9- Grammar.
- 10- Appropriate choice of words.
- 11- Accurate use of expressions.

4.2. The Pre- Post Essay Writing Test

4.2.1. Purpose of the Test

The essay writing test aimed at measuring the essay writing skills of the university students in English.

4.2.2. Validity of the Test

Test validity refers to the degree to which the test actually measures what it claims to measure.

To ensure validity of the test, the researchers submitted it, in its initial form, to a number of specialized jury members.

The jury members were asked to comment on:

- The clarity of the test instructions.
- The suitability of the topics to the level of university students.
- The clarity of the questions.

The test was modified according to the Jury members' comments and suggestions.

4.2.3. Reliability of the Test

Reliability is the extent to which the measurement of the test remains consistent over repeated tests on the same subjects under identical conditions.

To establish the reliability of the test, it was administered, on May, 5th, 2012, to a sample of 25 university students other than the sample of the study. Then, the same test was administered to the same group under nearly similar conditions on May, 19th, 2012.

The reliability coefficient of the test was estimated using Cronbach Alpha Formula. The estimated value was (0.89), which is considered reliable for the purpose of the current study.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table (1)

Pair	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	D.F	T	η^2	P-Value	Level of Significance
Exp.	45	75.57	19.58	88	2.960	0.076	0.005	1.66
Cont.	45	65.91	13.70					

Scores of the experimental and control groups on the post-test

Based on the above table, it is clear that there was statistically significant difference at 0.05 level between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the post –test in essay writing skills in favor of the experimental group. T value (2.960), η^2 value (0.076) and level of significance at 0.05 equaled (1.66).

Table (2)

Pair	N	Mean	Std. Deviat	D.F	T	η^2	P-Value	Level of Sign
T1	45	63.41	14.83	44	12.042	0.732	0.000	1.67
T2	45	75.57	19.58					

Scores of the experimental group on the pre-test and post-test in the overall creative writing skills.

Based on the above table, it is clear that there was statistically significant difference at 0.05 level between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre-test and post–test in essay writing skills in favor of the post–test scores. T value (12.042), η^2 value (0.732) and level of significance at 0.05 equaled (1.67)

6. Results of the Study and Discussion

The results of the study showed that the process approach to writing had positively affected the students' essay writing skills in EFL.

It was proved that the experimental group performed much better on the post- essay writing test than the control group.

Thus, the process approach to writing had a positive effect on developing university students' essay writing skills.

During the implementation of the process approach to the experimental group, the students were able to make use of the pre-writing stage to explore, link and generate new ideas, a fact that highly affected their writing.

In addition, the different stages of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing) provided the students with an opportunity to improve their writing in terms of ideas and mechanics of writing.

The results of the current study are in line with results of (Alsouqi, 2001), (Darayseh, 2003), (El Said, 2004), and (Ibnian, 2011), in which the researchers highlighted the importance of viewing writing as a process based on different stages.

On the other hand, the researchers observed that during the implementation of the process approach to the experimental group, the students were able to come up with unexpected and creative ideas, especially during the pre-writing stage, and that could be attributed to the brainstorming techniques, which highly contributed to creating a free atmosphere.

Moreover, the students were asked during the implementation of the process approach to attach special attention to the ideas rather than grammar and spelling, a fact that helped them feel free to express themselves and generate new ideas.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers believe that the process approach to writing could enable teachers to focus on the various parts of the writing process and give more freedom for students to experiment with their language. In addition, such orientation could help students develop confidence and establish fluency before they are concerned with a finished product.

8. Recommendations

Based on findings of the study, the researchers recommend to :

- 1- Place more emphasis on teaching writing as a process not only as a product.
- 2- Place more emphasis on the pre- writing stage due to its vital role in the writing process.
- 3- Provide students with enough opportunities to express their unique ideas, opinions, and reactions freely.

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