

An Attempt at Promoting Undergraduate Sudanese EFL Students' Performance in Academic Writing Skills

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Abstract

The study aims at suggesting effective methods and techniques that could improve English as a foreign language EFL students' performance in writing skills. The researcher uses the descriptive, analytical method. Four tools were adopted pretest, post-test, supporting program, and a questionnaire for teachers for collecting data. Twenty-five students in Holy Quran University, Sudan, were chosen purposively, and thirty EFL teachers at a university level were randomly selected as a sample for the study. Ninety percent of the teachers agree on the suggested program and techniques. The findings of the study indicate that: using varied techniques and activities in pre-writing stage promotes students' performances in writing, integration of reading and writing skills in the classroom improves students' writing skills, as well as encouraging extensive reading outside the classroom promotes students' performance in writing skills. Accordingly, the researcher recommends that: teachers should focus on the prewriting stage through different activities as well as reading and writing should be used in an integrated way in-class writing to guide the writing process.

Keywords: academic writing, performance, undergraduate EFL students

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Introduction

Writing skill is essential because it is a thinking tool and helps in the development of a language. Bjork & Raisanen 1997 as cited in Javid & Umer, 2014 state:

We highlight the importance of writing in all university curricula not only because of its immediate practical application, i.e., as an isolated skill or ability but because we believe that, from a broader perspective, writing is a thinking tool. It is a tool for language development, for critical thinking and, extension, for learning in all disciplines. (p.164)

To write it is essential to understand the primary system of a language. In English, this includes knowledge of grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. Vocabulary is also necessary, as is correct spelling and formatting. It is retrieved from <https://www.englishclub.com/writing/what.htm>

Mohammad & Hazarika, (2016) state that “

There is no doubt in the fact that writing is a tool for the creation of ideas and the consolidation of the linguistic system by using it for communicative objectives in an interactive way. Thus, it implies the successful transmission of ideas from an addresser to an addressee through a text, and this exchange of information becomes a powerful means to motivate and encourage the development of writing skills. Writing is often a challenge for EFL learners as it is the most painstaking and challenging language skill. (P.1)

Nunan (2003) notes that

writing is both a physical and a mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader. (P.22)

This study aims to suggest some techniques and activities to be used in teaching writing skills to the students belonging to English department in the College of Education at Holy Quran University to improve their writing skills.

Statement of the problem

As an EFL teacher for ten years or more, the researcher has observed that most of the EFL students in Holy Quran university do not benefit from writing courses. Teaching writing at the university level has little effect on students' writing performance. It seems that the students are not exposed to sufficient and suitable writing materials, which are not enough to enable them to make use of the prescribed instructions.

Significance of the Study

This study suggests effective techniques and activities for improving students' performance in writing. There are various techniques and activities which are very important for improving the students' performance in writing skills. Applying these techniques in teaching writing will enable the students to write effectively and efficiently to achieve his/her purpose. EFL teachers' trainers

who teach methodology can benefit from the study by applying the techniques and activities suggested by the researcher.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to:

1. suggest appropriate techniques and activities in pre writing stage to create interest and promote students' performance writing skills.
2. Implement writing techniques and strategies such as organization, outlining, formatting, revising, and editing to improve the students' performance in writing.
3. Integrating reading and writing by suggesting reading materials that improve students' proficiency in both reading and writing through adopting blended method.
4. Emphasize the necessity of extensive reading outside the class.

Questions of the study

- 1- How can students' performance in writing skills be promoted?
- 2- To what extent does the integration of reading skills and writing skills enhance students' performance in writing?
- 3- How can extensive reading outside classroom promote students' writing performance?

Hypotheses of the study

- 1- Using varied techniques and activities in the pre-writing stage like reading about the topic, watching a film, listening to a situation, or even describing a picture of the topic promote students' performances in writing'.
- 2- Integration of reading and writing skills improves students' writing skills by reducing spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization mistakes.
- 3- Reading outside classrooms (extensive reading) promotes students' performance in writing skills.

Methodology of the Study

The descriptive analytical method was adopted. four tools of data collection will be carried, a questionnaire, pretest, supporting programme and post-test. A questionnaire was distributed among thirty EFL university teachers. The pretest was given to twenty-five students from Holly Quran University to assess their performance in writing skills. The supporting programme was proposed to enhance students' performance according to the pretest results. The post-test was given to the same group of students to see to what extent the students benefit from the supporting programme.

Literature Review

Definition of academic writing

According to Al Fadda, (2012) academic writing is a mental and cognitive activity, since it is a product of the mind. The image of an individual working alone in a quiet environment has furthered the view of writing as a mental and cognitive activity. However, as it has been pointed out, "writing can be understood only from the perspective of a society rather than a single individual" (Burke, 2010, p. 40-41). Al Fadda, (2012) also adds that: "one of the basics of academic writing is the ability of the learners to access the relevant references and evaluate them

in order to put the different ideas and opinions together so that they can develop their own voice".(P.2)

Academic writing includes making an outline, summarizing and paraphrasing which students might struggle when writing their tasks. Al-Khasawneh & Maher (2010).

Concepts about academic writing

Writing could be a difficult skill to be learned or taught due to the fact that it is not a simple cognitive activity; rather it is believed to be a complex mental production which requires "careful thought, discipline and concentration" (Grami, 2010, p. 9). Al Fadda (2012) finds out that the main challenges English a second language (ESL) students encounter are differentiating between written and spoken words and phrases, reviewing grammar including subject-verb agreement and joining sentences together to make a coherent paragraph. (P.1)

Richards & Renandya, (2002) claim that "Writing involves very complex skills. Learners of the second language (L2) writing have to attend to higher skills such as planning and organizing and lower skills such as spelling and punctuation". (P.304)

Difficulties of academic writing

Many factors may cause the difficulties of academic writing when the students try to create their own piece of writing. Writing is a complex process because it requires the mastery of grammatical devices, conceptual thinking and judgmental (have a purpose and activating) elements (Byrne 1988, P.4).

In the process of learning EFL, students face many difficulties in writing, especially in capitalization, punctuation, language use, tenses, preposition, spelling, word order, subject verb agreement etc. The same issues have been raised by Khan (2011) as he mentions that they face several problems in phoneme clusters, spellings, grammar, mistakes due to first language L1 interference, structure, doubling of subjects, doubling of preposition, tenses, articles, appropriate vocabulary, incorrect use of prefixes & suffixes etc.

There is a study conducted by Ridha (2012) as cited in Taj Mohammad, & Zoheb, Hazarika (2016.P.2) on Iraqi college students where she investigated errors in English essay writings of EFL students. The errors were categorized according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The grammatical and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones. Most of the students' errors were led by the Arabic interference

Methodology

This section is designed to display the methods used to collect the data.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of English Language teachers at Faculties of Education in Gezira Locality and EFL students'. The study takes place at Holy Quran University.

The sample of the study was composed of students of level Seven (Semester No 7) in the college of education, Holly Quran University the total number of the student was (25). A number of (30) EFL teachers were selected randomly from two universities (University of Gazira, and Holy Quran University) to respond to the questionnaire.

A pre-test in writing skills was designed to check the students' proficiency in writing in which the students were asked to write about one subject.

Supporting Programme

The researchers proposed a supporting programme with the purpose of enhancing students' performance in writing skills, to be taught in eight weeks for the students, two periods per a-week. The researcher selected graded and interesting texts that suited students' level of understanding which contains different subjects to be taught as models of writing, with the use of a variety of effective techniques and activities while teaching writing starting by:

pre-writing stage: In this pre-writing stage, the researcher used some techniques and activities to help students to generate ideas through brainstorming sessions like reading about the topic, watching a film, listening to a text related to the topic, and describing a picture about the topic. Then the researcher sets a time limit for the students to be trained on how to brainstorm about a topic by giving the students different topics and different activities and exercises, because the researcher thinks that thinking and planning before writing will enable students to produce much better writing.

Other formal writing stages: the researcher here wants to help the students understand how to organize the material according to the requirements of the writing task and the general structure of the English composition by asking the students to write their ideas about the topic. This could be achieved by a writing technique called Listing. In this step, the student will write the topic at the top of a piece of paper and then quickly make a list of words and phrases that come into his mind. The next step is to organize the ideas into a simple outline. Next, the researcher asks the students to write a rough draft, using their outline as a guide. The students will write their rough draft as quickly as they can without stopping to think about grammar, spelling, or punctuation. just the aim of this stage is to get their ideas on a paper. This rough draft will be full of mistakes and errors, and this is perfectly usual and acceptable, because it is only a rough draft. They will fix the errors later. The next step, is for revising and editing. First, the students should revise the issues of the content and organization. Second, they should work on the smaller issues of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. At the end students will write their final copy of their topic.

The researcher provided more topics, exercises, and activities to deepen students' understanding of the suggested techniques and steps of writing. Besides, the researcher gave them eight articles about different topics to be read outside the classroom, hoping that this would help them to read extensively to increase their linguistic competency and general knowledge. Weekly the students were asked to summarize what they have read outside the classroom, and the researcher provides them with the feedback. This mixture of in-class writing and outside reading gives the students the practice they need to improve their writing skills.

This programme lasted in eight weeks, then it was followed by a post-test to see how much students benefit from the supporting programme. The results of the post-test confirm the students' improvement. It was a repeated test designed to assess students' improvement by means of the supporting program.

The Post-test

It was a writing test including one subject. It was designed to evaluate students' improvement after the pre-test. From the pre-test given before the supporting program the researcher could distinguish the areas of weaknesses and difficulties students face when they write such as inadequate formatting, poor vocabulary knowledge, spelling mistakes, and misuse of punctuation marks. The researcher developed a supporting programme to tackle the areas of weaknesses. So, the post-test was expected to come out with better results.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains twelve statements is meant to gather the relevant required data from the teachers of English language at the universities of (Holy Quran University, and Gezira university). It contains three various axes as follows:

The first axis, deals with the adequacy of the effective techniques and activities in prewriting stage that can motivate the students. The second axis deals with the integration of reading and writing skills inside the classroom while teaching writing steps. The third axis is concerned with how practicing reading (Extensive Reading) outside the classroom develops the students' writing performance. This questionnaire has been arbitrated by experienced teachers of the English language at different universities.

The questionnaire and the tests were arbitrated by experienced teachers from different universities. They confirm both the tests and the questionnaire measure precisely what should be measured.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section is confined to the presentation, analysis, discussion and interpretation of the data which were collected by means of the study tools: pre-test, post-test for students and the questionnaire for EFL teachers. This section is divided into two parts: the first part includes the tests results and the second part includes the questionnaire results.

The pre-test consists of the students writing work. First they were asked to write an essay in not less than 500 words about "Living in Cities or Villages". Time to finish this task was 90 minutes. Total papers were 25 essays. They were marked by five experienced teachers in the department. Any one of them has been given five papers. They identified mistakes and provided comments on the overall work. Their comments are summarized as follows:

- The format is untidy.
- Incorrect use of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization).
- Very weak structure.

- Lacking the ability and capability to generate new ideas and thoughts.
- Lacking the ability of how to develop a paragraph using topic sentence and supporting sentences (Paragraph Development).

Some samples of the students’ work: (see appendix-A)

After the supporting program finished, the researcher asked the students to write an essay about “Advantages and disadvantages of Co-Education in Sudan” (not less than 500words). The same previous time for the pretest 90 minutes has been given for students to finish the posttest. Total papers were 21 essays, because four of the students didn’t complete the program. The papers were marked by the same teachers who marked the pretest papers. They identified few mistakes this time and provided comments on the overall work. Their comments are summarized as follows:

- The students used a good format.
- Mistakes are not much in using of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization) as in the pretest.
- Most of the students’ work is organized and structured.
- Most of the students have the ability and capability to generate new ideas and thoughts based on the main topic. (most of the students’ works contain several specific and factual supporting sentences that explain or prove the topic sentences, including at least one example)
- Most of the students have the ability to develop a paragraph using topic sentence and supporting sentences (Paragraph Development).

The Results of the questionnaire

In this section, the results of the questionnaire will be displayed, analyzed and discussed. The tables below show the responses, which reflect the respondents' point of view on the questionnaire’s questions about writing skills. Each table corresponds to one axis in the questionnaire.

Hypothesis one: Using varied techniques and activities in a pre-writing stage like reading about the topic, watching a film, listening to a situation, or even describing a picture about the topic, promote students’ performances in writing’.

Table 1. Using varied techniques and activities in a pre-writing stage

Statement	Strongly agree		agree		Neutral		disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Varying techniques while teaching writing creates motivation and interest..	18	%60	8	%26.6	3	%10	0	%0	1	%3.3
Spending more time on pre-writing stage helps students to create ideas about the topic.	16	%53.3	12	%40	2	%6.6	0	%0	0	%0

using activities in prewriting helps students to generate ideas and thoughts about the topic	14		16		0		0		0	
		%46.6		%53.3		%0		%0		%0
The prewriting activities generate ideas which can encourage a free flow of thoughts and help students discover both what they want to say and how to say it on paper	21		8		1		0		0	
		%70		%26.6		%3.3		%0		%0
TOATL	69	%57.5	44	%36.5	6	%5	0	%0	1	%1

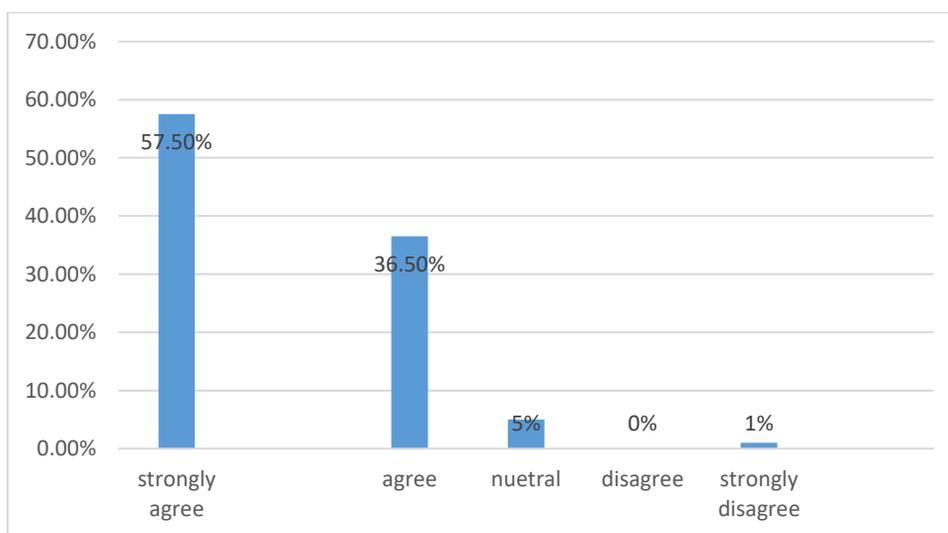


Figure 1: Percentage of teachers' viewpoints towards using varied techniques and activities in pre-writing stage

As stated in table 1 and figure 1, ninety four percent of the respondents to the questionnaire agree that: the use of the appropriate techniques and activities in prewriting such as reading about the topic, watching a film, listening to a situation, or even describing a picture ...etc promote students' performances in writing. This result strongly consolidates that variety of techniques and activities in the prewriting stage creates motivation and interest and promote students' performance in writing.

Hypothesis Two: Integration of reading and writing skills improves students' writing skills by reducing spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization mistakes.

Table 2. Integration of reading and writing skills

Statement	Strongly agree		agree		Neutral		disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Teaching writing skills through using the reading texts(model)	18	%60	10	%33.3	2	%6.6	0	%0	0	%0

develops the students' writing format background.										
Teaching writing skills through using the reading texts (model) develops the students' language proficiency.	22		7		0		1		0	
		%73.3		%23.3		%0		%3.3		%0
Teaching writing through using reading texts (model) develops the students' grammar awareness..	21		9		0		0		0	
		%70		%30		%0		%0		%0
Teaching writing through using reading texts(model) develops the students' awareness of writing mechanics. e.g punctuation, quotation, and capitalization.	20		8		2		0		0	
		%66.6		%26.6		%6.6		%0		%0
TOATL	81		34		4		1		0	
		%67.5		%28.5		%3		%1		%0

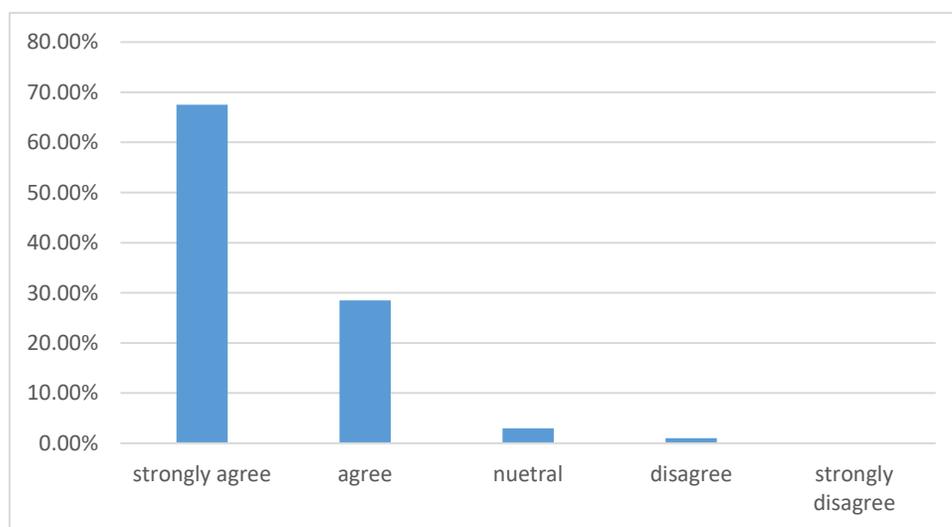


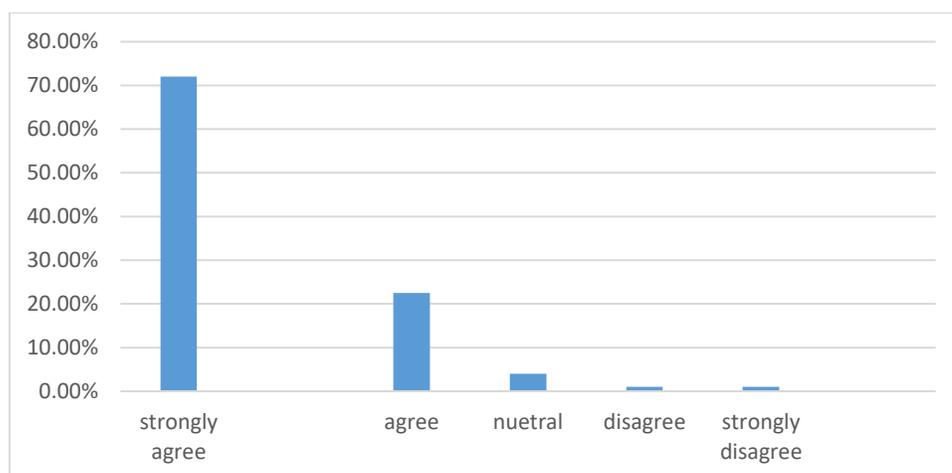
Figure 2. Percentage of teachers' viewpoints towards the integration of reading and writing

The results of table 2 demonstrate that, ninety six percent of the respondents to the questionnaire agree that: integration of reading and writing skills enhances students' performance, and solve the problems of using of incorrect mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization). This result shows that nearly all the teachers insist the using of reading and writing integrated while teaching writing.

Hypothesis Three: Reading outside classrooms (extensive reading) promotes students' performance in writing skills.

Table 3 . Reading outside classrooms (extensive reading)

Statement	Strongly agree		agree		Neutral		disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Most of the successful writers are keen readers	23	%76.6	6	%20	1	%3.3	0	%0	0	%0
Reading outside the classroom develops the students' competence about the language and this will develop their performance in writing.	20	%66.6	8	%26.6	2	%6.6	0	%0	0	%0
Reading outside the classroom helps the student to know different styles in writing and this will help student to have a good format when they write.	24	%80	4	%13.3	0	%0	1	%3.3	1	%3.3
Reading outside classroom improves the students' word choice, sentences structure, and how the whole content will sound when they write.	19	%63.3	9	%30	2	%6.6	0	%0	0	%0
TOATL	86	%72	27	%22.5	5	%4	1	%1	1	%

*Figure 3: Percentage of teachers' viewpoints towards the importance of extensive reading.*

The results of table 3 demonstrate that, ninety four percent of the respondents to the questionnaire agree that: reading outside classrooms (extensive reading) promotes students' performance in writing skills. The results make it clear that the students' writing performance can be enhanced through extensive reading.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This section concludes the study with the findings and recommendations. The study is an attempt aiming at improving undergraduate EFL students' performance in writing skills. Four tools were used to collect the data (a questionnaire for EFL teachers- Pretest and posttest for students- a supporting program). The sample was chosen purposefully from English language students in college of education in Holy Quran University. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used for analyzing the data of the questionnaire which was constructed of three dimensions with twelve statements concerning various aspects of the study. Thus, the data was discussed, analyzed and the main findings were carried.

findings

- 1- Using varied techniques and activities in pre-writing stage like reading about the topic, watching a film, listening to a situation, or even describing a picture about the topic. promote students' performances in writing`.
- 2- Integration of reading and writing skills improves students' writing skills by reducing spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization mistakes.
- 3- Reading outside classrooms (extensive reading) promotes students' performance in writing skills.

Recommendations

1. Teachers should vary the teaching methods when teach writing.
2. Teachers should insist on the prewriting stage through reading about the topic, presenting a video, listing tips or describing a situation for students to help them to create ideas about the topic.
3. Teachers should give the students models of texts and ask the students to organize and format their work as found in the model.
4. Reading and writing should be used in an integrated way in class writing to provide guidance throughout the writing process.
5. Regularly assign brief writing exercises in your classes.
6. Teachers should give their students different articles and reading texts to be read outside classroom and ask them to write summary about what they have read.
- 7.

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Appendix A

Some samples of the students' work

