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Enhancing EFL Majors' Writing Performance and Their Beliefs about Teaching Writing via Some Linguistic Learning Styles-Based Activities

A Thesis

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(Curriculum and Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language)

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**قُلْ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي {٢٥} وَيَسِّرْ لِي
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Abstract

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Research Name: Enhancing EFL Majors' Writing Performance and Their Beliefs about Teaching Writing via Some Linguistic Learning Styles-Based Activities

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The present study aimed at identifying the learning styles of the EFL students, measuring the effect of these learning styles-based activities on performing the sub-processes of composing a coherent paragraph via presenting some activities based on Kolb's Inventory of Learning Styles. The participants of the study, (N. 100), were first year, EFL students, Faculty of Education, Zagazig University. Data were collected by administering Kolb's Inventory of Learning Styles to these participants in order to specify their styles, and the writing performance test besides the beliefs scales to conclude their perceptions about teaching writing. The study adopted the quasi-experimental design of experimental- control pre-post exposures to the study tools. Findings indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre and post administrations of the writing performance test, favoring the post results. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre and post administrations of the scales for beliefs related to writing instruction, favoring the post results. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and that of the control group on the post administration of the writing performance test, favoring the experimental group post results. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and that of the control group on the post administrations of the scale for beliefs related to writing instruction, favoring the experimental group post results. The study concluded the effectiveness of using learning styles based activities in enhancing writing performance and changing positively beliefs related to writing instruction. It recommended utilizing learning styles in teaching language skills in general and particularly writing.

Key Words : Learning Styles / linguistic Activities / Writing Performance / beliefs about Teaching Writing

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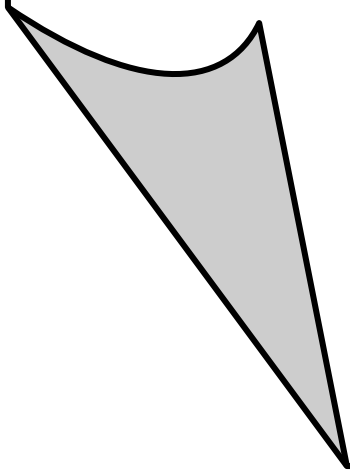
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Chapter One

Background and Problem



Chapter outline:

Introduction

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1.2. Pilot Study

1.3. Statement of the Problem

1.4. The Study Hypotheses

1.5. Significance of the study

1.6. Delimitations of the study

1.7. Definitions of Terms

1.8. Organization of the Study

CHAPTER ONE

Background and Problem

Introduction

Writing is not only language, but thoughts put down in ink or in an electronic form. It is a language and content. In this sense, learning to write is not simply a matter of writing things down. It is a process stretching over a continuum on one extreme is transcription and in the other extreme is composing.

This makes it, (Byrne 2007:18) comments; the most difficult skill EFL learners ever do and perform. He divides the problems that make writing difficult into three categories. The first, he calls psychological, caused by lack of interaction and feedback between the reader and the writer. The second category consists of linguistic problems. Unlike speech in which spontaneous errors can be tolerated, writers have to express themselves in a clearer and more grammatical manner in order to compensate for the absence of certain features of spoken language. The third category consists of cognitive problems; i.e. writing has to be taught through formal instruction. Organizing the frame work of ideas in written communication has to be mastered. The complexity of the composing process is also due to the fact that it includes three main areas of choice: the ideas to be expressed, how to organize those ideas, and how to express them. The difficulty, therefore, lies in "invention" (what to say), "arrangement" (the organization of what's said), and "style" (the expression of ideas with acceptable diction and grammar).

So, writing is a sophisticated process that combines many interrelated components categorized by (Valette 2007: 24) as content, grammar, organization, mechanics, word choice, and writer's purpose. It is more sophisticated than the other language skills and adds "communication" through the written word which possesses a certain degree of finality and demands real proficiency from the writer, if it is to be effective.

According to (Byrne 2001: 6), writing serves a variety of pedagogical purposes as follows:

- 1) Enabling teachers to interact with different learning styles and needs. Some learners, especially those who do not learn easily through oral practice alone, feel more secure if they are allowed to read and write in language. For such students, writing is likely to be an aid to retention, if only because they feel more at ease and relaxed.
- 2) Providing learners with tangible evidence that they are making progress in the language. So, it satisfies a psychological need.

- 3) Providing a variety of classroom activities serving as a break from oral works (and therefore a quieter and more relaxing time for both students and teachers). At the same time, it increases the amount of language contact through work that can be set out of class.

Commenting on these purposes, (El-Marsafy 2003: 64) argued that there is a close relation between language skills as writing lends itself to integration with other skills; thus, a reading activity may lead to a discussion from which a piece of writing is produced, while dictation is a well known example of integrating listening with writing. So, writing is intimately related to other language skills. One reads a text to write answers to questions (in reading comprehension activities) or to summarize (in precise activities). Similarly, one usually discusses ideas before writing them down (in composition activities), or listens before writing (in dictation).

Besides, the written word, (Simsek 2009: 12) adds, remains a principal medium of communication between people. According to the National Commission on Writing (NCW), writing is a critical skill for students' college life. So, it plays an important role in EFL students' academic, personal and professional lives for three main reasons:

1. Writing well is a vital skill for academic or occupational success, but one that's especially difficult for FL learners to master.
2. Writing is an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as learners explore advanced lexical or syntactic expression in their written work
3. Writing across the curriculum is invaluable for mastering diverse subject matter, allowing teachers to better understand their students' state of knowledge and thinking process and thus adjusting instruction when necessary.

There is a close relationship between writing and thinking which makes the former a valuable part of any language course. (Bello 1997: 77) justifies this value stating that learning to write in Foreign Language (FL) allows learners to crystallize their ideas in print, and share them with others, therefore, develop a powerful voice in their new culture. Writing in a FL also enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce grammar and vocabulary they have already learned.

When teaching writing, (Fredman 2008: 13) stresses the following dimensions:

- Content: a student-writer should:
 - Answer the questions or respond to the task.

- Elaborate, using details, examples, reasons, and illustrations and other sources.
- Clearly state the purpose.
- Use a format that suits the purpose and enhances the response.
- Organization: a student-writer should:
 - Stay focused on the topic.
 - Have a clear and coherent beginning, middle and end.
 - Carefully organize to produce a logical and sequential piece of work.
- Style and voice: a student-writer should:
 - Use above grade level of vocabulary.
 - Grab the reader's attention.
 - Use tone that is appropriate for the purpose and audience.
- Mechanics: a student-writer should:
 - Follow rules of grammar and punctuation without errors.
 - Use a variety of complete sentences.

Supporting these issues, (Byrne 2007: 22) classified writing skills into four sub-skills:

- *Grammatical skills* : producing correct sentences.
- *Stylistic skills*: manipulating sentences and using written language effectively.
- *Mechanical skills* : correctly using those conventions peculiar to the written lang., e.g. punctuation, spelling .. etc.
- *Judgment skills* : writing in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with the ability to select, organize and order relevant information.

That's why (Nunan 1999: 16) comments, writing requires care, thought, discipline and concentration which make it the most difficult skill students ever learn . There is a dearth of actual classes in writing, in which no time, effort, or energy to improve these classes. Composing refers to all the processes that lead to the writing of something involving the previous sub-processes as reflection about the topic, gathering of information, working on a series of drafts, editing and revising. More precisely, writing involves a process of perceptual development. Psychologists use the word "perception" to describe the active process of obtaining information about the world through assimilation that can be well investigated by various techniques stressing the "during" phase of writing performance.

1.1. Context of the Problem:

Pedagogy was, for long times, dominated by form focused approach to teaching writing. The traditional form-focused approach tended to emphasize

the correctness of the student writers' texts as a "product" and disregard the intellectual process of the individual writer who created the text. This approach tended to be a formulaic and model-based. Students were presented with rules about what constituted good writing, and were expected to produce texts that stick to those rules. They were given little indication of precisely how to set about producing such texts, except perhaps to be instructed to make a plan based on which they write, and then edit for linguistic accuracy. The focus of the class was on the model and on the students' finished texts, or product, which was assessed by the teacher, in terms of how accurate it was linguistically, and how it well paralleled the model being employed. Little indication was given to how they were supposed to write more successful essays than the ones they had produced. How the content of a product was to be created and developed. The process of writing was not taught or even considered (Head 2000).

To (Nunan 1999: 15) this traditional, product-driven, rules-based, correctness obsessed writing instructions was deficient in two aspects. First, the teacher views the students' writing as a product, which assumes that the student knows how to write, thus, uses what he/she produces as a test of that ability. Second, the teacher focuses on the form, i.e. syntax, grammar, and mechanics, rather than content. Such instruction hinders writing fluency because of much attention to form, rather to meaning and processing.

Teaching writing is now quite different. (Gass 2008: 28) investigated the teachers' role during writing among secondary stage students, i.e. what to do to influence their development as writers. Audi-video tapes, interacting formats such as conferences and authors' circles, and formal spontaneous conversations were used during writing. Gass also adds that Data analysis focused on the role of the teacher in each aspect of the writing process. It was concluded that the teachers' roles are many within the writing time: goal-setter, organizer, demonstrator, manager and assessor.

According to (White & Arndt 2001) those who advocate the process approach to writing see the act of writing from a very different perspective, focusing on the means the completed text was created as much as on the end product itself. If students learn that writing is a process through which they can explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well.

(Donato 2004: 55) developed a program aiming at developing more prospective feelings about writing while increasing the quality, quantity and variety of writing. Stressing the process of writing and cooperative learning was employed with fifth grade students. Results indicated that:

- Students writing quality improved 10% to 25% in terms of the basic elements of content and mechanics.

- The quality and quantity of vocabulary finished works during sustained writing periods improved 33% to 100%.
- The students' feelings about writing showed 25% to 88% improvement by the end of the writing program. Teachers participating in the program noted a 38% to 100% improvement in their students writing.

(Glenn 2007: 36) held the view that during the process writing, student-writers are engaged intellectually and emotionally in reconstructing the meaning of what they are writing and monitoring the comprehension of this meaning by asking questions, reflecting, and role-playing the text. They are also able to make critical judgments about the effect of the author's attempt on conveying this understanding.

Additionally, (El-Sakka 2011) investigated the effect of a proposed program based on blending process writing approach with web logs to develop the writing performance and critical reading of EFL prospective teachers. Fifty fourth year EFL prospective teachers from Suez Canal University, were tested in critical reading and writing performance. Results indicated that the proposed program was effective in developing their writing performance and critical reading.

The process writing, to (Nunan 1999: 42), reinforces the writing performance as it is based on the writer-text-reader interaction, purpose, audience, and intention in the production of discourse while the functional dimension of communication is reinforced. It allows for the fact that no text can be perfect, but that a writer may get closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing and reworking successive drafts of a text. Writing, here, is a recursive rather than a linear process, moving from planning to composing to revising and editing.

1.2. Pilot Study:

A pilot study was conducted by the researcher in the Faculty of Education, Zagazig University, First year, English dep. Thirty five students were required to compose a paragraph about a familiar self chosen topic , See Appendix (1). During writing, they were found confused about beginning writing, going on, which chosen ideas and whether or not these ideas were correct, even with much theoretical discussions and explanation. Their weakness was diagnosed as being due to their inability to organize their ideas. Correcting their products, results showed that the students face many problems in the following areas:

- 1) Organizing the paragraph.
- 2) Developing ideas.
- 3) Using writing mechanics.

- 4) Identifying relationships among ideas.
- 5) Writing clear position statements.
- 6) Presenting evidence to support positions.
- 7) Responding to center arguments.
- 8) Developing an argument.

Surveying their opinions, they expressed their reluctance to engage in the process of writing in general. They face difficulties due to spelling, mechanical skills, lack of motivation, poor mastering of grammar skills, wrong application of sentence structure, word order or previous writing failure. They, therefore, believed that teaching writing to others was something beyond their abilities. Besides, they revealed that the kind of writing instruction they received was theoretical and that they didn't practice writing as a process, or according to their mode of learning. The class time was completely devoted to oral skills, i.e. the lecturer explains how to write theoretically. In doing so, they were deprived of the instructor's assistance, guidance and feedback during writing.

Coping with these pilot results, the researcher found strong empirical evidence that support them, (Abdel-Hack 2004), (Abdel-Latif 2007), (Abdel-Samie 2000), (El-Marsafy 2004), and (El-Sakka2011). All their findings indicated that EFL majors' writing performance is poor and doesn't indicate that they would be able to teach their pupils how to write. EFL majors' beliefs about teaching writing seem ambiguous.

Piloting the opinions of the lecturers of "Essay" subject in the faculties of Arts (Zagazig and Benha) who are supposed to teach it, they expressed the unsatisfactory levels of content and organization performance of EFL majors. The problem is noted for its seriousness and commonness in the Egyptian faculties of education. Such an awkward situation evidently shows that EFL majors in the Egyptian context encounter confusion and problems when attempting to write essays, or even paragraphs. See Appendix. (3).

In the course of EFL majors, and during their significant teaching experiences as students, they acquire their beliefs about how to teach English in general and about how to teach writing in particular. These beliefs are shaped by sociolinguistic or psychological factors. They provide criteria for judging and evaluating right and wrong, bad and good, true and false, appropriate and inappropriate in any teaching situation, (El-Swedy 2012: 120)

Overtime, (Ali 2008: 70) adds, and in conjunction with numerous congruent experiences, these beliefs become more ingrained into EFL majors' beliefs system and less inclined to change. Instead, these beliefs serve as filters that provide meaning to their new experiences and justify their actions. These beliefs act as a sieve through which each new experience is interpreted and