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Faculty of Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

The Effectiveness of a Reflective-based Program on Developing English Academic Writing Skills at the Faculties of Education

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree in Education

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فاعلية برنامج قائم على التأمل لتنمية مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية باللغة الانجليزية في كليات التربية

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ABSTRACT

This quasi experimental study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a suggested reflective-based program on developing EFL graduate students' academic writing skills at Faculties of Education. Two intact groups of students, 26 students enrolled in the Special Diploma and 9 Master's candidates at the Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University, were assigned the same 11-week treatment in a mixed-method research which employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Tools included, an Academic writing test, weekly reflective journals, for the students and the instructor, and finally, a follow up questionnaire. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-posttests in favor of the posttest, which unequivocally indicates the effectiveness of the suggested treatment. The results also revealed that there was a significant improvement in the students' academic writing sub-skills. However, when the results of the two groups were compared, the Special Diploma's improvement was higher than the Master's students. While each of the groups showed better improvement in certain sub-skills, both groups had positive attitudes towards the program.

***Keywords*:** Academic Writing skills, Reflective teaching, Reflective Journals

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Chapter One

Background and Problem

Writing is an essential linguistic activity that characterizes human life due to its importance in conveying ideas and experiences in all human endeavors, such as: arts, business, and education. It acts, as well, as a medium for expressing feelings towards others. Writing is a form of self-expression that demonstrates a person's linguistic and intellectual abilities. In fact, writing is considered to be an effortful and a complex skill which requires more abilities than other language skills (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam & Van den Bergh, 2006).

1.1.Academic Writing

There are several types of writing such as expressive, persuasive, literary, and academic, each with a different purpose. Of those, and due to its noteworthy feature, Academic writing is the focus of this study as it is generally required for university assignments and academic research, and it is also used for publications that are read by scholars and researchers or presented at conferences. Academic writing is the medium through which scientific knowledge is passed from one generation to future generations.

Effective academic writing is considered one of the essential assets and a primary prerequisite to achieve high academic performance by students. It is a cornerstone skill for developing and maintaining the quality of graduate students' performance particularly their ability to embark on scientific research. On this view, Margolin, Ram, and Mashiah (2013) affirm that academic writing

abilities are considered fundamental priorities of scholarly success. Likewise, Ragab (2003) asserts that academic writing is a solid proof of the scholar's ability to organize the content and ideas, demonstrate knowledge, and show a good command of language use. It is the mastery of this writing skill which reflects the technical rigor and content quality of scientific research. In fact, effective academic writing is a proof of the author's ability to organize information in a comprehensible manner and demonstrate mastery of knowledge for the benefit of the reader. For academics, research outputs produced through academic writing are the most crucial contributor to a long and successful career (Antonioua & Moriartyb, 2008; Lee & Boud, 2003; McGrail, Rickard, & Jones, 2006). These outputs also support the visibility and recognition of the authors.

Studying in an English instructional environment exposes the graduate students to the complexity of discipline-specific, graduate level literacy requirement. A significant number of EFL graduate students are required to undertake the challenge of producing long texts such as master's theses and doctoral dissertations. The nature of these long writing tasks, mainly the argumentative and expository texts, involves critical literacy and it requires synthesizing information from a variety of linguistically-demanding sources. Consequently, as affirmed by Arkoudis and Tran (2007), academic writing as a form of thinking is fundamental for academic success of graduate students.

It is widely noted though that graduate students in many countries have few opportunities to take courses which enable them to transit from writing, for example, a term paper to writing an academic paper. Therefore, the students need support in making such a transition to master the requirements of academic writing. It is also well known that graduate students find academic

writing difficult and stressful, and that they look to university faculty for guidance (Mullen, 2006). Professors from different faculties, however, often expect that students enter universities with the required writing competencies to automatically embrace academic writing tasks (Zhu, 2004). In fact, many of these educators believe that teaching writing is solely the responsibility of language teachers, and assume that learners will get to write better on their own. As a consequence, when they assign elaborate complex academic papers to their students, with little or no support, they often get low- quality written products. It could also be argued that all academics with proper first degrees and higher degrees would have with time developed the ability to write for scholarly publication. This assumption was, however, questioned as long ago as 1987, when Boice, as cited in Pelias (2003), established that becoming an academic writer can be challenging, even for those who are knowledgeable in their subject areas. As a result of this, graduate students frequently single out academic writing to be the most difficult part of learning and studying.

It is worth noting that academic writing difficulties are demonstrated by EFL graduate students worldwide. Bulter (2015) argues that when international graduate students choose to study in English-medium universities, they face an academic writing dilemma. By the same token, Bailey (2011) affirms that one of the most demanding tasks international students face is producing effective academic English in writing their essays and reports. These students are assumed to be able to use English to report and discuss disciplinary research. The reality though is that international students bring different cultural norms and literacy practices when writing academic English papers. This affects the quality of their writing, and hence, a clear gap appears between what is expected from them and what they are capable of – a gap that cannot be bridged without explicit attention to developing EFL/ESL academic writers' needs.

Murray (2015, p. 96) contends that the issue of the students' inability to write academically is a vital educational concern nowadays. She affirms that more is needed to understand the dimensions of the problem, to overcome challenges, and to promote this skill. Moreover, as asserted by Murray (2015), as well as Skinner and Mort (2009), there is a substantial problem with the current programs designed to develop academic writing skills. They argue that they are taught out of context; they are devoid of relevant content and rely on general tips. This generic teaching leaves students facing problems when required to write full research papers in their own field.

Several recommendations came out of the above mentioned studies, for example, integrating field related content with writing and critical thinking skills. Hence, in order to understand the problem of the novice writer, there is an equal need to understand the disciplinary contexts within which they are required to write, or more specifically, the disciplines they are writing for. Accordingly, academic writing skills must be integrated within the appropriate content of their related field of study.

The feeling of inadequacy in academic writing may also lead to corrupt practices that are deceptive, unethical and even criminal in academia. Plagiarism is at the heart of academic writing because it blurs the ethical boundary of creativity and ownership of knowledge for graduate students. In a document published by the Middle East Technical University Academic Writing Centre (2011), plagiarism is defined as the use of someone else's words or ideas without taking permission. This kind of academic dishonesty can go up to 80% among the students (Franklyn-Stokes & Newstead, 1995) and these students resort to such a method because of a variety of

reasons. There are some who deliberately plagiarize and their only motivation is to gain undeserved benefits while others plagiarize because of their lack of knowledge or writing skills rather than dishonesty reasons (Davis & Carroll, 2009).

In Egypt, the situation is not dissimilar. Despite the significance of utilizing academic writing in research papers, many graduate students at Egyptian public and private universities fail to master the skill to produce rigorous academic text. Recently, universities in the Middle East and elsewhere have set accreditation standards and criteria for students' academic writing. This is now a prerequisite for succeeding in different courses as well as for completing the required assignments or research projects. This development is a further indication of the growing importance of improving academic writing skills in Egyptian universities in order to integrate those universities' research outcome into any regional and international scientific discourse.

1.2.Reflective Teaching/Learning

Reflection refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled and all available information about the persons as well as the situations are considered and evaluated. It is a response to previous experiences and a usage of relevant facts. This requires a continuous assessment of the respective information as a basis for evaluation and decision-making. Reflection has been defined from different perspectives and disciplines. Generally and in common, these definitions include two key elements: (1) making sense of experience, and (2) reimagining future experience.

Reflective thinking is not new in the field of teaching. For around 50 years, a considerable number of educational theorists and practitioners used the concept of reflection in their work.