The Effects of Process- Product
Teaching of Topic Sentence,
Supporting Details and
Coherence Skills on EFL Majors
Achievement in Composition
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## Abstract :

The present study investigated the effects of utilizing a combined process-product method versus a product-only method on EFL majors' achievement in English written composition. The sample comprised 80 control and 96 experimental students, both males and females. Three null hypotheses regarding the treatment effects of systematic instruction in topic sentence, supporting-details, and coherence skills were tested. Data analyses using one-way ANOVA and t-test indicated that the experimentals excelled the controls significantly on all three compositional skills of topic sentence, supporting details and coherence. The findings highlight the need in EFL composition instruction for adopting a flexible, dynamic and systematic approach of both process and product dimensions due to the remrakable complexity of the skills and processes involved in learning to write especially in a new language.

Despite that writing in the foreign language classroom has been neglected for long to a great extent, particularly under ALM methodology (Dubin and Olshtain, 1980:353; Freedman, Pringle and Yalden, 1983:186-187; Zamel, 1987, 700-701); the reader of composition research, be it in the first or foreign / second language, can easily observe the wide range of viewpoints, approaches and methodologies adopted in the teaching of the writing skill to native and

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non-native learners. As will be seen from the following account of research studies on composition, this emerging interest in the writing skill has resulted in a multitude of diverse rival theories and practices that are indicative, for the most part, of the inherent complexity of the writing process and, on the other hand, the quite demanding task of teaching it to foreign language (FL) learners.

To start with, teaching writing in the FL classroom has traditionally been regarded as an extended form of speaking and grammar practice, thus emphasizing micro-level grammatical accuracy at the expense of macro-level discourse competence (Kern and Schultz, 1992:1-2). In such an approach to writing, focus is not on the development, organization and expression of the student writer's own ideas and thoughts but rather on surface feature accuracy. At least at the advanced level of ESL, courses that continue to stress sentence syntax or any approach that deals only with linguistic facts is not likely to be enormously effective in preparing non-native speakers to write, or read, English texts efficiently (Kaplan. 1983:142). This traditional view that writing skills will transfer automatically from grammar teaching or will develop naturally as a consequence of grammar study is questionable for two important reasons. Citing Eisterhold (1990). Kern and Schultz (1992) stated that, first, not enough is presently known\_about the processes of skill

transfer to allow making use of them in developing the writing akill. Again, citing Broddocch, Lloyd-Jones and Schaer (1963), they wrote that studies on first language writing have repeatedly indicated that formal grammar instruction has little positive effects, and in some cases adverse effects, on fostering writing ability.

A second approach to the teaching of composition in the FL classroom proposes the adoption from the start of a generally three-stage plan of controlled, guided and free composition ( For example, Chastain, 1976; Rivers, 1981). This approach has been criticized by the functionalist for its failure to give the student writers appropriate practice in writing as a means of interaction through teaching them to relate the manner of expression to the topic, inteded reader and purpose. Again, this second approach is deficient in that it shelters the students too much from the real task of communicating through writing and by insisting that they progress correctly one tiny step after the other (Tomlinson, 1983:7).

A third approach to the teaching of composition has been the assignment of topics for free writing by the students with or without only minimal assistance from the instructor. Paulston and Bruder (1976:205-206) reported that they assigned free composition at all levels of ESL instruction and that they concentrated on the development and organiza-

tion of ideas at the intermediate and advanced levels while at the same time giving some attention to student needs at the sentence level. The free-writing-followed-by-correction approach has been also criticized, from a structuralist point of view, for the profusion of errors it produced (Tomlinson, 1983:7).

Apart from these traditional methodologies of teaching writing there have been major transitions in linguistics that have resulted in significant contributions to the study of both written and spoken discourse. The major shift has been from traditional emphasis on morphological and syntactic aspects to the study of communicative texts. In this respect, all new text models and theories have been concerned with the processes readers and writers go through to comprehend and be comprhended (Connor, 1987:678-679).

It is due to these significant changes in the area of text linguistics and discourse analysis that the product-based paradigm of composition instruction and research has been contrasted sharply with the process-based paradigm. It has also become possible to distinguish three distinct areas of composition research in Europe and the United States (White, 1985, cited in Pery-Woodley, 1991:69). These are:

- 1) surveys of the writing product, i.e. writing as text;
- 2) investigations into the nature of the composing activity,

i.e. writing as a mental process; and 3) analysis of the settings and functions of the written text, i.e. writing as a communicative act.

In another research-based synthesis of writing studies Connor (1987:679-680) made reference to Enkvist's (1975. 1978, 1985, 1987) development of four major text-linguistic approaches to writing including the sentence-based, the predication-based, the cognitive-based and the interaction The sentence-based approach is primarily conapproaches. cerned with how to achieve text cohesion through overt linking of sentences into paragrapghs and then paragraphs into whole sentences. The predication-based approach sees that the same language input can be arranged into different texts according to text rhetorical types such as descriptive. expository, narrative and argumentative texts. The cognitive and interaction models overlap (Connor, 1987; 679-680) as the overriding theme in both models is the writing communicative intent, i.e. the writer's, or speaker's, awareness of their audience and the interaction between the reader and the text.

Apart from these insightful syntheses of the research efforts taking place in composition, whether in first or second language instruction, a sizeable proportion of the studies on composition have been mainly divided into two major teaching and research paradigms, namely, the product-centered, and the process-based. According to Hairston (1982)

cited in Connor (1987:677-678), by product-centered is meant the traditional approach to writing that stresses expository writing, making style the most important aspect in writing, and that maintains that writing is linear and is determined by the writer before starting to write. The process-centered paradigm, on the other hand, focusses on writing processes; teaches strategies for invention and discovery; considers audience, purpose, and context of writing; emphasises excursiveness in the writing process; and distinguishes between aims and models of discourse" (Connor, 1987:677-678).

The proponents of the process-centered approach have been very critical of product-based methodology in teaching ESL writing. This includes as well contrastive rhetoric research on composition for its examination of the writing product only detached from L2 contrastive rhetorical context and for ignoring the processes the FL writer goes through to produce a text (Leki, 1991:123). In this regard, Zamel (1982: 196) pointed out that, "The composing process involves much more than studying a particular grammar, analyzing and initating rhetorical models, or outlining what it is one plans to say. The process involves not only the act of writing itself, but prewriting and rewriting, all of which are interdependent"

However, more recently a number of researchers have made claims to the need for adopting an integrated process-product approach to composition instruction in the FL classroom

(Pery-Woodley, 1991:74). These studies reflect a trend in English composition of focusing on the development of both the writing processes and the writing product simultaneously (Zamel, 1985:79-101, Dvorak, 1986:146-167; Chamot, 1989: 13-24). Kern's and Schultz's (1992) study of the writing performance of intermediate French students has provided empirical evidence that composition instruction that focuses on the writing process in addition to the finished product has positive effects on students' writings.

Connor (1987:691), too, stated that both product and process approaches to composition instruction are necessary if a comprehensive theory of writing is to be developed. Such an integrative theory of product and process would help to resolve "the apparent paradox in some process research" (Connor, 1987:678) which sets to analyze sequences of different types of products or writing protocols to provide description of the writing process. Bridwell (1980:197) stressed also that the composing process is both linear and recursive and that the two approaches of process and product are eventually complementary and sometimes overlap.

Finally, Raimes (1985:247-248) called for attending to product as well as to process in teaching composition by helping the students to use heuristic devices not only to focus on meaning but also to concentrate on linguistic and rhetorical features after the ideas have been expressed in

some written form. And Sommers (1987) recommended that instead of the narrow emphasis on protocol analyses of the student writers' mental processes in writing or revising, teachers as well as researchers should analyze the learners' drafts more analytically, with due attention to development in tone and personal style.

At the end of this introductory review of product, process and integrated process-product paradigms of teaching composition and writing research it should be emphasized that the complexity of the writing process, as has been pointed out at the outset, is obivious. In face of this remarkably apparent subtlety of both writing and learning to write, this profusion of approaches, models and practices seems understandable and is to be expected. More importantly, this knowledge should be brought to bear to composition instruction and research epecially that most of the research work done in this area has come mainly from the study of English as a native language rather than from research on EFL/ESL.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM :

Teaching writing in the EFL preservice program in many faculties of education, and faculties of arts as well, is supposedly provided in the so-called "Essay & Linguistic Exercises" courses which are required in all four years of preservice teacher preparation. Focus in these courses is primarily on free writing where the students are almost

always instructed to write essays "on the following topic(s)" Only corrections for grammar follow, and very little intervention from the "essay" instructor is done in the way of teaching the composing skills. Writing is thus viewed, on the one hand, as a personal talent rather than a skill that needs to be developed through actual instruction, sufficient practice and constant evaluation.

On the other hand, because of the excessive concern with grammar - that is probably the result of the instructors' lack of knowledge about how and, worse, what to teach in the composition class, the "linguistic exercises" part of the course practically replaces the effective teaching of English composition. Under this minimal instructional condition, and because of the many other limitations common to EFL preservice training in general, the students' writing proficiency suffers a great deal as good writing is thus equated with correct structure and memorized style cliches at the expense of the numerous writing skills and processes to be taken care of in communicative and authentic writing.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY :

Recent research on the writings of EFL Arab students indicated that their writings suffer considerably from several writing deficienceies such as <u>aurality of the mode of expression (e.g., excessive use of coordination). failure to stay with general statements and initial ideas, lack of depth</u>

in topic idea substantiation, and deviation from the intended rhetorical function of the writing task at hand (Shakir, 1991:399). Many researchers attributed such weaknesses to Arabic interference especially to important rhetorical contrasts between Arabic and English (Kaplan, 1966; Sa'Adeddin, 1984). Addressing these writing problems in EFL composition research can possibly lead to significant improvements in both the content and teaching practices of the writing courses in EFL pre-service training programs.

Meanwhile, while the efficacy of the process approach to writing, as contrasted to the product-based approach, has been demonstrated in previous research in a number of studies on EFL Egyptian students (e.g., Kamal, 1986; Kamel, 1989; Kawtb, 1992), the complex nature of the writing process, the demanding task of teaching it and the need for maximizing the student writers' opportunities for benefiting from available instructional assistance at the different stages of the composing process would make it more appropriate to investigate the effects of an integrated product-process approach on EFL students writing. In this particular learning situation special preparations are made not only for quiding student writers at work, but also for providing essential and needed help before and after the composition experience has come to a conclusion, for ideas development strategies as well as for sentence skills monitoring.

#### PURPOSES OF THE STUDY :

The overall purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of using a combined process-product method on EFL majors' proficiency in writing English compositions.

This integrated approach provided basic instructional assistance to the student writers participating in this study at all the developmental stages of pre-writing, writing, rewriting and post-writing together with due attention to the improvement of sentence skills.

Specifically, this study attempted to measure the effects of this integrated approach of process and product on improving second-year EFL majors' composition writing in the three following skill areas: 1) paragraph unity, 2) paragraph supporting details, and 3) coherence.

#### HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY :

Three null hypotheses of no significant differences between the control and experimental treatments were constructed and tested regarding the experimental effects of combined process-product instruction on the participant students' achievement in EFL composition with regard to:

a) paragraph unity skills, b) supporting details skills, and c) coherence-achieving skills. The .01 level of statistical significance was set for rejecting the null hypothesis.

METHODOLOGY:

### A) Sample .

The earple included 80 students in the control group and

98 students in the experimental group. The students' general proficiency in English was judged as intermediate by three of their professors of the English subjects. Because in the present study the same group was used for control and then for experimental purposes, no pre-testing was needed. All students studied according to the control-group treatment (product method) and then shifted to experimental-group methodology (combined process-product) at the mid of the term. This design was preferred to a traditional control-experimental design for it was practically difficult to minimize student outside-of-class interaction had the classical control-experimental design been followed. To be sure, experience has shown that a lot of outside-class communication and academic cooperation takes place among university students of the same grade level and specialization.

# B) Teaching Procedures

In the control group, the participants were taught according to the traditional product method of assigning the students selected composition topics to write about followed by correction of their linguistic mistakes. This method, not at all uncommon to the participating students, consistently commenced with the instructor's (the researcher's) announcement of the topics to write about. The students then wrote their compositions as home-assignments. In class, approximately 10 - 15 students were asked to read their compositions

aloud in turn with the instructor correcting and calling for student corrections. Correction was made basically for grammartical errors and style and chances were ocassionly given for rephrasing ambigious sentences in the interest of writing clarity.

Control group teaching continued for five weeks at the beginning of the first term, five hours a week ( two and a half hours per session). This phase of the study was concluded by testing the controls on the writing skills of paragraph unity, paragraph support, and coherence.

Experimental group teaching started at the seventh week of the term and went on for six consecutive weeks, five class hours a week ( two class sessions, two and a half hours each). The typical class procedure followed with the experimentals can be summarised as follows:

# Stage 1 : Prewriting

- 1- The participants were assigned at least three different topics to write about only one of them at home.
- 2- In class, oral discussion that continued for about half an hour was made of only one of the topics; choice was left to the students to choose a topic of interest to them.
- 3- Then, students were given aout 15 minutes to jot down whatever ideas they could possibly think of about the topic or to write outlines of its main points.

4- Students'ideas were discussed and several of these were usually accepted as relevant.

# Stage 2 : Writing

- 1- The students were then asked to write for about 15-20 minutes about the topic that was discussed with them or on one of the two other topics announced.
- 2- Three to five students were chosen, generally on a voluntary basis, to read their compositions to class. Only few corrections or modifications were made at this point to foster greater confidence and to encourage more participation.
- 3- A one-and-a-half hour session of instruction on how to make a writing point, provide adequate details, and achieve writing coherence was given by the instructors, two weeks each. This instruction time was used in this manner:
  - a) giving definition of the writing skill in question,
     i.e. telling what it is the student writer is expected
     to do.
  - b) reading examplary paragraphs showing both acceptabtle and unacceptable use of the writing skill at hand.
  - c) giving exercises on the identification of both welland poorly-written paragraphs.

# Stage 3 : Rewriting

1-The students did that at home; they were asked to rewrite on any one of the three announced topics. They

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were encouraged to refer to their composition handouts if they liked to, but to feel free to write on their own.

- 2- The students were instructed to revise their writings making extensive use of whatever materials available to them.
- 3- They were asked to write final drafts to be handed in to the instructor in the next class.

# Stage 4 : Post-writing

- 1- 10-15 students were chosen randomly to read, in turn, their composition to the whole class.
- 2- The instructor stopped the reading student as needed for the students to comment on one or more of the following points:
  - appropriateness of the student's topic sentence(s).
  - adequacy and level of specificity of supporting details.
  - clarity in the method of materials organization and the use of coherence-achieving techniques.
  - grammar, word choice and style.
- 3- The students were given one final chance to revise their compositions at home, especially those who had had a chance to present their compositions in class. The students' final drafts were then submitted to the instructor. Due to time limitations, it was not possible for the instructor to comment in writing on

these final drafts.

## D) Testing:

The test administered in the control-group treatment was administered again in the experimental treatment at the conclusion of the sixth week of instruction for the experimentals. This test consisted of 42 items (14 items for each of the skill areas of writing unity, support, and coherence) and tested specifically the student writers' correct identification and use of topic sentences, developing these key statements via the right choice of supporting details as well as their proficiency at securing and maintaining paragraph coherence.

The topic sentence skills test contained identification and production of appropriately written key statements entailing the ability to differentiate between sentences 'announcing' versus sentences 'advancing' topic statements, too broad versus too narrow topic sentences, topics and ideas about them, writing topic sentences for a given number of supporting details, and making a point out of some limited topics.

The test items for supporting details skills tested the student writers' skill to add details to given topic sentences, identify paragraph appropriacy as regards adequacy of details provided and adding sentences of realistic details for given supporting points.

Coherence test items tested the examinees' identification of the types of coherence-schieving devices. These included transition words, repeated words, synonyms and pronouns. They also tested the order of ideas presentation in paragraph writing, namely, time order, emphatic order and a combination of both as well as the student's skill at logically rearranging scrambled passage sentences. Internal test consistency, using Cronbach's alpha (Al-Abd, 1976:188), was .62.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION :

One-factor ANOVA and t-test analyses were utilized to test the null hypotheses of no difference between the control group treatment and the experimental group treatment in achievement in EFL composition as regards the three compositional skills of writing unity, supporting details and coherence. The results of these statistical analyses are presented in tables 1, 2 and 3 for unity, support and coherence skills respectively.

Table (1): One-factor ANOVA and t-test results of control and experimental treatments for the unity compositional skills

Source	df	Sum squares	Mean Squares	F-test	t-value
Bet.Groups W.Groups Total	† 174 175	1403.27 780.22 2183.49	1403.27 4.48	312.95	17.89*

<sup>\*</sup> significant at < .01

Table (2): One-factor ANOVA and t-test results of control and experimental treatments for the supporting details compositonal skills

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Source	df	Sum squares	Mean Squares	F-test	t-value
Betw.Groups W. Groups Total	1 174 175	1726.21 990.79 2716.99	1726.21 5.69	309.15	17.41*
Significant	at <	.01	<b>-</b>		

Table (3): One-factor ANOVA and t-test results of control and experimental treatments for coherence skills

Source	df	Sum Squares	Mean Squares	F-test	t-value
Betw.Groups W. Groups Total	î 174 175	315.66 552.79 868.45	315.66 3.18	99.36	9.97*
Significant	at «	.01.			

Furthermore, the means and standard deviations for the three variables of unity-in-writing skills, support skills and coherence skills in the two control and experimental treatments are presented in table (4) below.

( see next page )

Table (4): Means and standard deviations of the unity, support and coherence skills for the control and experimental treatments

Skill Area	Control		<u>Experimental</u>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD 
Unity skills Support skills Coherence skills	6.16 2.2 9.18	2.19 1.89 2.13	11.83 8.49 11.87	2.06 2.73 1.43

As can be seen in tables 1, 2 and 3, the experimental treatment (combined process-product) outperformed significantly the control treatment (product only) for each of the three composition skills of writing unity, supporting details and coherence. All three null hypotheses were thus rejected at the .01

Table 4 further indicates that the largest experimental gains were those for providing adequate supporting details while the least significant differences were obtained for coherence skills with writing unity significant differences coming in second place. These findings reflect the extent to which the experimental treatment was apt to meet the actual writing needs of the participants.

The superiority of the combined process-product treatment over the product-only treatment in teaching English composition skills in the present study is illustrative of the
appropriateness of the combined approach for meeting the
complex requirements of the writing process and the adequacy

of this approach in attending to important writing tasks and student writers' actual needs in the composing activity. In this respect, the provisions made in the experimental method were thus more conductive to more effective student contact with and experience in the multi-faceted constituents of the writing task not only after the composing process had come to an end or only while the student writer was at work but before, during and after writing. This close and available teacher assistance and direction at all the important developmental phases of the writing activity might have contributed considerably to the superior performance of the experimental treatment.

The findings of the present study thus establish empirical substantiation for the claims for the efficacy of an integrated process-product approach to composition teaching such as those made by Raimes (1985), Connor (1987), Wintercwd (1983), Kern and Schultz (1992) and others ( see Pery-Weodley, 1981). In the present study, the specification of the three major skill areas of writing unity, supporting details and coherence and giving intensive practice and due instructional assistance in them might have also facilitated the student writers' task in ensuring greater command of these important writing considerations in the experimental treatment. The reason why this specification was probably helpful to the experimentals is perhaps that in the product-

only approach they had little opportunity to know what are, at least, the basic conditions of efficient writing and the necessary learning tasks to attend to for writing survival.

Again, in view of the major rhetorical differences between Arabic and English, on the one hand, and the students' background writing experience in Arabic, their native language, where little explicit teaching of composition skills is given, on the other hand, directing students' attention to what they were expected to learn might have particularly influenced the student writers' composing behavior in most positive ways. Again, the combined process-product treatment has thus proved remarkably responsive to their real learning needs that are largely overlooked under traditional teaching of writing not only in EFL but also in their first language as well.

However, the specification of these major skill areas for training the EFL student writers in this study did not preclude the important practice of free writing by the students. Although extensive illustrations and examples of how the unity, support and coherence skills are normally achieved in effective written communications, classroom instruction stressed free writing in the first place. Care for the application of both composing (process) and text structure (product) skills took place after the opportunity was given to the participants to free-write at home before they came to

class to learn about these skill areas. This procedure was intended to encourage the free and spontaneous expression and development of thoughts rather than be preoccupied with the application of the writing knowledge and principles as such. Thus, while constant monitoring of student writing performance was made available to the student at the prewriting, writing, rewriting and post-writing stages, caution was exercised not to reduce the composing process into mechanical exercising in or unimaginative application of textual or writing protocols. This very strategy, as an integral component of the combined approach utilized in the present study, might have also contributed significantly to the experimentals' better achievement.

#### CONCLUSIONS :

The present study contrasted the effects of a productonly approach and a combined process-product approach on EFL
majors'achievement in the three composition skill areas of
writing unity, supporting details and coherence. As has been
pointed out ealier, the results of this study provide supportive empirical evidence backing the combined approach to
EFL composition due to the inherent complexity of the writing
activity and the remarkable rhetorical contrasts between
Arabic and English and because of the EFL majors' background
experience in learning to write in both of the two languages
where no substantial instructional assistance in composition

is made available to the student writers.

In EFL composition instruction, this experimental substantiation of the process-product paradigm is particularly important as it focuses both writing teacher's and student writer's attention on the specific skills, the pasic processes and the necessary preparations needed to effectively approach writing in the EFL class. Since many a teacher tends to teach in the same way he or she has been taught, the prospective EFL teachers' improvement in English written composition that is the result of exposure to, use of and practice in combined process-product techniques is likely to give needed direction to their future efforts to teach writing classes more efficiently.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS :

The following recommendations for both EFL composition teaching and composition research are deemed important in the light of the results of the present study:

## First, For Composition Teaching :

1 - EFL composition teachers in pre-service teacher education as well as in the faculties of arts undergratuate EFL program should assume greater responsibility in teaching the composition class by being sufficiently prepared for determining both course content and methods of teaching that content following a rather comprehensive approach that emphasizes the complementary role of both

process and product teaching.

- 2- A four-year plan of the English composition skills should be taken as a basis for preparing appropriate teaching materials to be used for giving systematic training in the basic composition skills and processes to EFL prospective teachers. This should be always accompanied by providing ample opportunities for free writing and constant teacher direction that is characterized by flexibility and systematic planning.
- 3- The word "essay" should be substituted by the more realistic term "composition" in the title of these courses for
  first through fourth year students in EFL pre-service programs. "Essay" is a rather misleading term in this context
  as it is suggestive of a too ambitious objective where a
  great deal of originality on the part of the writer is to
  be expected (See, for example, Heaton, 1975:127).
- The problem of evaluating EFL students' compositions in the pre-service preparation program should be addressed more realistically through the employment of alternative evaluation devices other than teacher correction such as self and peer correction techniques (Zidan, 1993). However, reducing composition instructors' teaching load, assistance provided by EFL teacher demonstrators and teacher assistants as well as having small composition classes, probably of no more than 25-30 students, should all secure

more satisfactory evaluation of students' written work in the EFL composition class.

# Second, For Research on Composition :

- 1- Because focus in the present study was on paragraph writing skills, even though practice was given in free writing of multi-paragraph compositions, future research should attempt to examine the effects of the combined method on multi-paragraph writing structures especially with regard to the supporting details and coherence skills.
- 2- Future research should examine the effects of the integprocess-product method on increasing the EFL student writers'awareness of their audience and the writing purpose.
- 3- Due to the apparent difficulty on the part of the great majority of EFL majors to substantiate their general statements adequately, future research should explore further different techniques of paragraph development skills and the effects of a reading-writing approach on improving the students' skill in providing sufficent and adequate details.
- 4- Descriptive studies and well-documented ethnographic reports of EFL students' needs in composition should furnish a solid and a necessary basis for effective instruction in composition skills and processes.

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أثر إستخدام الطريقة الموحدة للعمليات الإنشائية والمئن الإنشائي في تدريس مهارات صياعة العبارات الرئيسية ، والتفاصيل الشارحة ، وترابط النص على تحصيل الطلاب المتخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة لجنبية في مادة الإنشاء د./ حطب طب طب نيسدان •

# مختصر للراسة .

قلمت هذه الدراسة بمقارنة أثر استخدام الطريقة الموحدة الأساويي العمليات الإنشائية والمتن الإنشائي المسلوب المتناوب المتا

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