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Using Graded Readers for Developing EFL Preparatory Stage Pupils' Writing Skills

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of using graded readers for developing EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills in terms of vocabulary, grammar, content, organization and mechanics. The participants of the study were forty six (46) second year preparatory stage pupils from Qallin preparatory school for girls, Kafr el-Sheikh, Egypt. The study adopted the quasi-experimental research design, with one research group. Instruments designed and used in the study were writing skills' inventory, pre post writing test and analytical rubric. The experimental treatment was conducted during the second semester in the academic year 2018/2019. The pre-post writing skills test was administrated. Findings of the study indicated significant differences between the mean scores of the research group on the pre and post writing test on all five sub-skills in favor of the post test. The results showed that using graded readers enhanced the pupils' EFL writing skills. This study concluded with recommendations pertinent to using graded readers as a tool in teaching writing skills.

Keywords: *Graded readers, EFL writing skills.*

Introduction

Writing is a significant skill in language production. Recent research (e.g. Mahboob & Elyas 2014; Marlina & Giri, 2014) emphasizes that its significance increases when it comes to writing in English language which is extensively used for global communication. The role of writing as a multi-target ESL/EFL tool

is critical and expanding. Writing equips learners with communication and thinking abilities. Alharbi (2017) asserts that developing writing skills has obtained a great consideration as an academic skill. Moreover, with the expansion of business worldwide and financial and social globalization, it turns out to be paramount.

Writing is a valuable tool for educational and occupational purposes (Chan, 2010; Cruz, 2015; Ellis, 2013; Garcia, Brown & Elbeltagi, 2013; Jose & Abidin, 2016). It has its own status as an independent course in many institutions of higher education. Hosseini, Taghizadeh, Abedin and Naseri (2013) state that the ability to write well can have a profound effect on people lives and is crucial for success in life. Some students may lose better scores despite answering correctly in exams because of a poor writing skill. Furthermore, lack of clarity in communication due to unclear writing expressions cause confusion, doubt and bad feelings. To conclude, written communication is supposed to eliminate doubt and confusion rather than create it.

However its importance, writing is a complex task and a basic skill that is challenging for learners. Berman and Cheng (2010) state that students consider writing as the most burdensome skill to be mastered compared with listening, speaking and reading. Jahin and Idrees (2012) illustrate this difficulty in generating and forming ideas and translating them to be meaningful. Writing necessitates a balance among several aspects like purpose, content, audience, organization, vocabulary and mechanics. Researchers (e.g. Chartrand, 2012; Fauzi, 2015; McKinley, 2013) also confirm that the

mastery of writing requires letter formation, spelling and punctuation, word choice and sentence structure. It also requires higher level skills of planning, organization, development of ideas, and effective use of rhetorical patterns. Moreover, Grami (2010) believes that writing is not just a simple direct production of what someone knows or can do; conversely it is a sophisticated task that requires innovative concept, concentration and self-discipline. Luchini (2010), on his part, confirms that the ability to write a text for most ESL/EFL students is a difficult task since the writing process necessitates a wide range of cognitive, interpersonal and linguistic strategies of which students are mostly unaware.

Review of literature

It is commonly acknowledged that the four language skills are interrelated, and a large number of studies have investigated these relationships, especially the relationship between the two literacy skills, reading and writing (e.g. Allen, Snow, Crossley, Jackson, & McNamara, 2014; Cho & Brutt-Griffler, 2015; Choi, Moon, Paek, & Kang, 2018; Erhan, 2011; Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Kirin, 2010; Shen, 2009; Schoonen, 2019; Zhang, 2017).

Reading and writing as literacy skills have integral roles; reading is a tool for improving students' writing. (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Shanahan, 2001b; Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015; Graham, Kiuvara, McKeown, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perrin, 2007). The basic assumption here is that the readers gain insight about writing as they engage with text. One

possible way that this might happen is that readers pay attention to how authors construct their message. A meta-analysis focusing on students in grades four to 12 (Graham et al., 2012) finds that asking students to read, analyze, and emulate model text resulted in improved writing quality. Cho and Brutt-Griffler (2015) similarly identify significant improvement in Korean intermediate and advanced level middle school students in their summarizing ability after the implementation of integrated reading and writing instruction. A meta-analysis focusing on students in grades four to 12 (Graham et al., 2012) found that asking students to read, analyze, and emulate model text results in improved writing quality. Reading and writing involve a conversation between readers and writers (Shanahan, 2006). Further, Moore and MacArthur (2012) claim that it is possible that observing readers in action may lead to important insights that inform writing. Observing readers as they try to carry out a task based on material read or listening to others vocalize their thinking processes, while reading may make writers more aware of their audience as well as issues involved in the production of text. To conclude, theoretical rationale and research evidence from ESL and EFL instruction supports the relationships between reading and writing as well as the advantages of encouraging students to read as much as possible to enhance their writing ability.

Graded reading is mostly known as extensive reading. Albay (2017) states that graded reading is reading huge amounts of texts that interest the reader. Rather than learning the language, the focus is on developing reading fluency and general comprehension. According to Gillian (2012), graded reading refers to a kind of

textbook of varying levels of difficulty, intended to be used by students to read or learning a foreign language. Azumuddin and Zuraina (2017) illustrate that, in graded reading, the reading materials are selected according to the competence of the learner, the vocabulary and syntax are controlled to suit the learner's English ability. The difficulty of each series book is gradually increased, which can meet the needs of every learner. Further Albay (2017) maintains that reading a wide variety of sources enables learners to build reading speed and enhance reading confidence. Graded reading helps learners to promote grammar and vocabulary knowledge. While reading learners revisit unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar constantly. Constant repetition of the words and structures allows learners to process them faster. Graded reading exposes learners to massive amounts of language practice. Graded reading or extensive reading is usually done with graded readers.

Graded readers are reading materials produced for second language learners. Zou and Long (2019) state that the idea of graded reading was put forward by foreign scholars in the early 19th century, and then developed abroad, especially in Europe and America. At the same time, a variety of graded reading standard system also emerged and gradually improved. Graded readers have been defined and described by many researchers. Hill (2008, p. 185) defines them as "books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax". On their part, Day, Bassett, Parminter, Bowler, Bullard, Furr, Prentice, et al. (2011) define graded readers as narrative texts written for foreign language learners. In addition,

Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) describe graded readers as a kind of entire books that are commonly divided into levels of difficulty, and have been prepared precisely by controlling vocabulary and language structure suitable for each level. Therefore, graded readers allow readers to be confident and satisfied (Yi Lien, 2010).

Graded Readers are both fiction and non-fiction books written especially for language learners to develop their reading rate and fluency and to provide them with opportunities to practice real reading for pleasure. They are called "graded" readers because they are written in light of a pedagogical syllabus which has progressive levels of difficulty (ERF's: Guide to ER 2011). Graded readers ranged from six to eight levels of difficulty from "Starter" to "Advanced" with dozens of books at each level each of approximately equal difficulty. They are accurately graded in terms of the plot, vocabulary, number of word families, grammatical constructions and reasonable use of images. The Starter level books have a very limited vocabulary of highly frequent words and phrases and the simplest grammar. The Elementary level books have slightly more difficult vocabulary and grammar, a more complex plot and fewer illustrations. The Intermediate level books are more difficult - and so on up to the Advanced levels. In this way, graded readers help students to step-up their learning by building on previously learnt knowledge and skills (ERF's: Guide to ER 2011).

Statement of the problem

In light of the researcher's teaching experience, the results of the pilot study and previous studies, the problem can be identified in EFL preparatory stage pupils' deficiency in writing skills. As it has been a common complaint that preparatory stage pupils are incapable of expressing themselves in a clear, correct and comprehensible manner in writing. Therefore, the main concern of the present study was to investigate how far using graded readers could possibly promote EFL second grade preparatory stage pupils' writing skills.

Questions of the study

The current study investigates the following main question:

"How could using graded readers contribute to developing the second-grade preparatory stage pupils' writing skills?"

This main question branches out into the following sub-questions:

- 1- What are the EFL writing skills necessary for second-grade preparatory stage pupils?
- 2- What is the entry level of the second-grade preparatory stage pupils with regard to those writing skills?
- 3- What is the framework of the proposed intervention based on graded readers?

- 4- How far could using graded readers develop EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills?

Hypotheses

1. There are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the research group in both writing sub-skills and overall writing skills on the pre and posttest in favor of the posttest.
2. There are statistically significant differences between the mean score of the research group in each writing sub-skill on the pre and posttest in favor of the posttest.
3. The proposed intervention based on graded readers is effective in developing EFL second-grade preparatory stage pupils' writing skills.

Participants of the Study

Forty six second-grade preparatory stage pupils participated in the study. They were selected at random out of seven classes from Qallin governmental preparatory school for girls in the academic year 2018-2019. The participants represented one research group who were taught through using graded readers.

Design of the study

The quasi-experimental research design was adopted in the present study to investigate the effect of using graded readers on developing preparatory stage pupils' writing skills. To achieve the purpose of

this study, one group pre-posttest design was utilized in the experiment. The study sample was selected at random from a governmental preparatory school for girls in Qallin directorate, Kafr El-sheikh governorate. Before administering the treatment, a writing skills pre-test was administered to the group. The study group was taught using graded readers. By the end of the treatment, the writing skills post-test was administered. Ultimately, the researcher statistically analyzed the scores of the test.

Instruments of the study

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the researcher made use of the following instruments:

Reference Instruments

- A Writing Skills Checklist (designed by the researcher).
- A Reading Comprehension Placement Test (The researcher adopted Macmillan Readers Level Test).

Research Instruments

- A Writing Skills pre-posttest (designed by the researcher).
- A Writing Scoring Rubric (designed by the researcher).
- A Writing Analytical Rubric (designed by the researcher).

Content of the proposed intervention

The proposed intervention was administered along sixteen sessions; these sessions aimed at developing second-year preparatory stage

pupils' writing skills through graded readers. The researcher assigned one session to introduce the program, one session to administer the writing skills pre-test, two sessions for each skill of the five main writing skills, three sessions to integrate the five writing skills and a last session to administer the writing skills post-test.

Table. 1

Content of the sessions

Session	Skill focused
Orientation session	Introducing graded readers to participants
Pre-test	Pre-administration of the writing skills test
Session 1 & 2	Vocabulary
Sessions 3 & 4	Grammar
Sessions 5 & 6	Organization
Sessions 7 & 8	Content
Sessions 9 & 10	Mechanics
Sessions 11 & 12 & 13	Integrating the five skills of writing
Post-test	Post-administration of the writing skills test

Each writing session contained four main stages:

- **Warm-up stage:** In this phase, the teacher provides the participants with dynamic activities to do individually, collaboratively or in pairs to get them motivated, excited and completely engaged in learning.

- **Pre-reading stage:** This stage includes two sub-stages; first, the teacher provides participants with feedback about their writings in the previous session. Second, some activities are used either to stimulate pupils' prediction or encourage them to recall some events of what they finished reading.
- **While-reading stage:** During this stage, participants do silent individual reading; then, they are involved in while-reading writing tasks. Further, early finishers in each group are engaged in extra activities.
- **After-reading stage:** The value of reading graded readers becomes clearer in the post reading stage, as the pupils share their reading and impressions. They are motivated to assess their own learning and assess their peers. The teacher takes notes about their progress and gives feedback.
- **Writing practice stage:** Participants are involved in writing tasks through the four previous stages; writing tasks are divided into four sub-stages:
 - **Planning (pre-writing):** During planning stage, the learners are required to collect data, gather information and generate ideas through many skills as brain storming, elaboration, mapping and listing.
 - **Drafting:** Once learners plan for their writing, the next step is to start drafting. It is the actual stage of writing as the learners translate their thoughts and ideas to form the first version of their written work. While

writing the first draft, the learners only focus on the content ignoring grammar, spelling and punctuation.

- **Revising:** Revision is not a stage of polishing, but focusing on content, checking organization, adding, substituting or cutting. While revising makes the content adequate, editing focuses on making the written work smooth and refined.
- **Editing:** During the editing stage, learners attempt to polish their writing through checking grammar, sentence structure, spelling and punctuation; then utilize different strategies to correct mistakes using different resources.

Reading materials

The reading Materials used in the current study was all graded readers because of the wide literature (e.g. Ateek, 2017; Furutaka, 2015; Harrold, 2013; Sandom, 2013; YieLien, 2010) on their role in language learning. Of the four major publishing groups (Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Penguin Readers and Macmillan Readers), the readers utilized in this study were selected from Macmillan's series of readers. They were selected from four levels (pre-intermediate, elementary, beginner and starter) and of various genres. Finally, fifteen readers from Macmillan graded reader series were used in this study as reading materials. The following table shows the readers selected by pupils in each level.

Results

Testing the first hypothesis of the study

To test the first hypothesis stating that "**there are statistically significant differences between the mean score of the research group on the pre and posttests of writing sub-skills and overall writing skills, in favor of the posttest**", the Paired Samples t-test was used to determine if there was any significant difference between the mean score of the research group on the pre and post measurement of the writing skill and sub- skills test. Results are shown in table 2.

Table 2

Mean score differences between the research group pre and posttests of writing skills and sub-skills. (n=44).

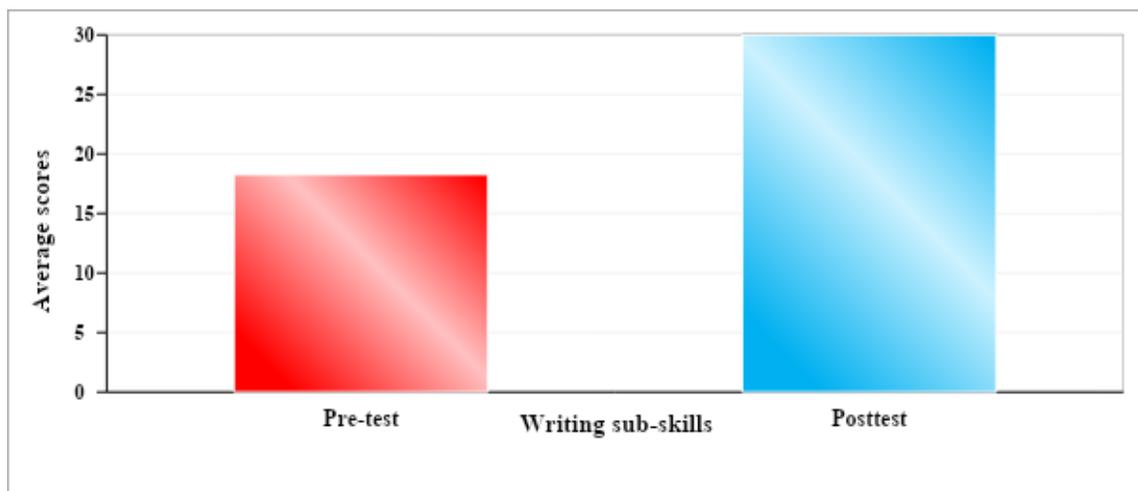
Writing skills	Test	Mean	SD	T-test		
				T	DF	P-value
Sub-skills	Pre	18.27	5.56	19.11	43	0.001
	Post	31.50	2.93			
Overall Writing	Pre	9.55	7.19	17.94	43	0.001
	Post	25.09	9.21			
Total score	Pre	27.70	11.53	27.02	43	0.001
	Post	56.56	11.55			

Table 2 shows the results of the paired sample of t-test for comparing the mean score of the research group pupils' writing skill and sub-skills on the pre and post writing skills tests.

- **Regarding the writing sub-skills**, the mean score of the research group writing sub-skills on the pre-test was 18.27 and the standard deviation was 5.56, while the mean score of the writing sub-skills on the post test was 31.50 and the standard deviation was 2.93. Moreover, the t-value was 19.11 and the P-value was 0.001 which was less than 0.05. Therefore, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurement of writing sub-skills tests, in favor of the post measurement as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1

Difference between the mean score of the research group on the pre and posttest in writing sub-skills

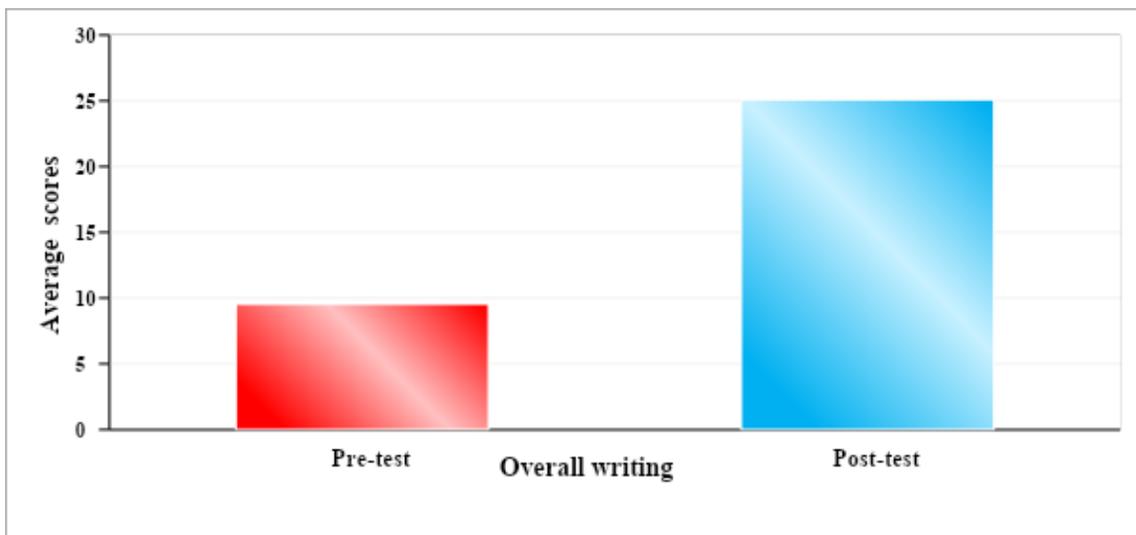


- **As for writing skills**, the mean score of the research group on the writing skills pre-test was 9.55 and the standard deviation was 7.19, while the mean score of the research group on the overall writing skill post- test was 25.09 and the standard

deviation was 9.21. Moreover, the t-value was 17.94 and the P-value was 0.001 which was less than 0.05. Consequently, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurement of the overall writing skill tests, in favor of the post measurement. This result can be illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Difference between the mean score of the research group on the pre and posttest in overall writing skills

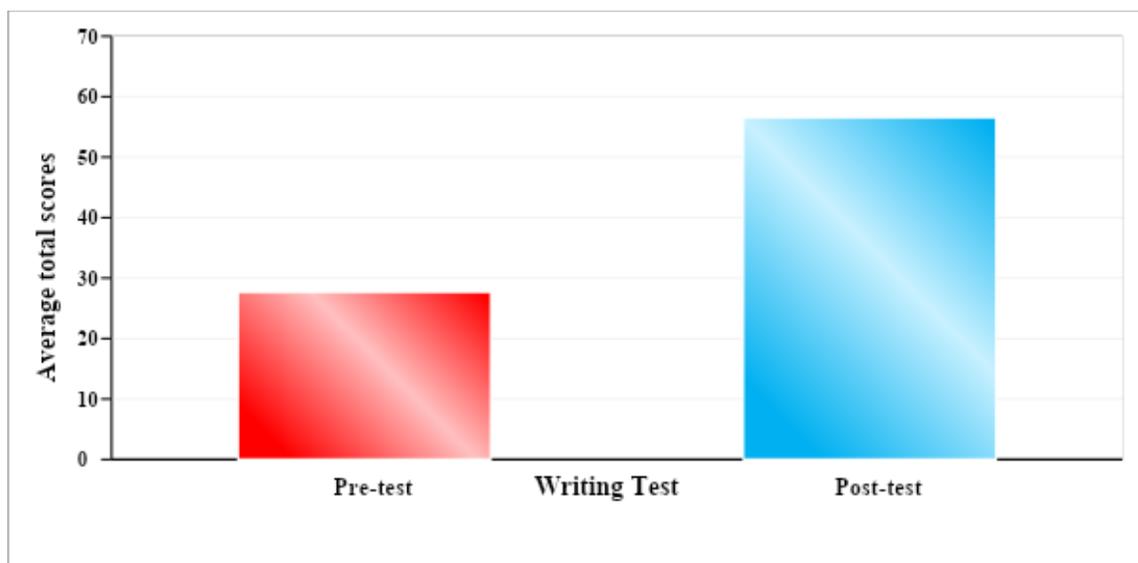


- **As for the total score of writing skills and sub- skills**, the mean score of the research group on the pre-test was 27.70 and the standard deviation was 11.53, while the mean score of the post test was 56.56 and the standard deviation was 11.55. Moreover, the t-value was 27.02 and the P-value was 0.001 which was less than 0.05. Therefore, there is a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurement

of writing skills test, in favor of the post measurement. This result is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3

Difference between the mean score of the pre and post writing skills test.



As shown in table 2, in addition to figures 1, 2 and 3, there were statistically significant differences between the mean score of the research group pupils on the pre and post measurement of the writing skills and sub- skills test, in favor of the latter. Hence, the first hypothesis was verified.

Testing the second hypothesis of the study

The second hypothesis stated that **"there are statistically significant differences between the mean score of the research group on the pre and posttests on each writing sub-skill, in favor**

of the posttest." To test the second hypothesis, the Paired Samples t-test was used to determine if there was any significant difference between the mean score of the research group each writing sub-skill on the pre and post measurement of the writing skills test, and the results are shown in table 3.

Table. 3

Mean score differences between the research group pre and posttests of each writing sub-skill. (n=44).

Writing skills	Test	Mean	SD	t-test		
				T	DF	P-value
Content	Pre	3.16	1.60	10.63	43	0.001
	Post	5.61	0.58			
Organization	Pre	1.99	1.01	11.78	43	0.001
	Post	3.74	0.50			
Vocabulary	Pre	5.51	0.91	3.07	43	0.004
	Post	5.85	0.37			
Grammar	Pre	4.27	2.28	21.47	43	0.001
	Post	10.68	1.58			
Mechanics	Pre	3.34	1.29	11.67	43	0.001
	Post	5.61	0.69			

Table 3 shows the results of the paired sample t-test for comparing between the research group pupils each writing sub-skill mean score on the pre and post writing skills test.

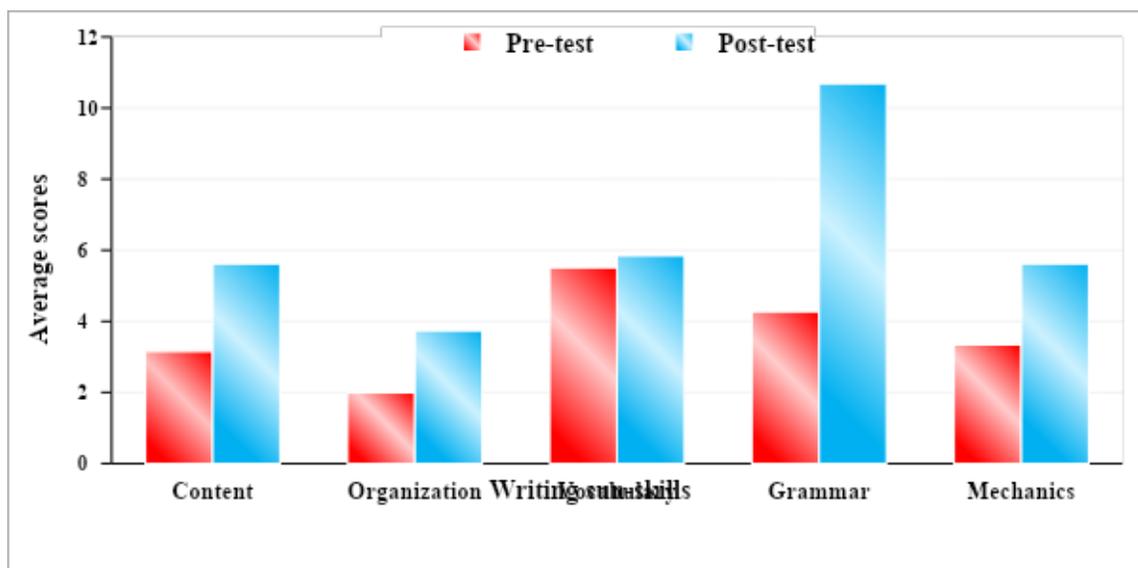
- **Regarding content skills**, the research group content skills mean score on the pre-test was 3.16 and the standard deviation was 1.60, while the mean score of the post test was 5.61 and the standard deviation was 0.58. Moreover, the t-value was 10.63 and the P-value was 0.001. Therefore, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurement tests of content skills, in favor of the post-measurement.
- **With regard to organization skills**, the research group organization skills mean score on the pre-test was 1.99 and the standard deviation was 1.01, while the mean score of the post test was 3.74 and the standard deviation was 0.50. Moreover, the t-value was 11.78 and the P-value was 0.001. Therefore, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurements of organization skills, in favor of the post- measurement.
- **As for vocabulary skills**, the research group vocabulary skills mean score on the pre-test was 5.51 and the standard deviation was 0.91, while the mean score of the post test was 5.85 and the standard deviation was 0.37. Moreover, the t-value was 3.07 and the P-value was 0.004. Accordingly, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurements of vocabulary skills, in favor of the post-measurement.
- **As for grammar skills**, the research group grammar skills mean score on the pre-test was 4.27 and the standard deviation was 2.28, while the mean score of the post test was 10.68 and

the standard deviation was 1.58. Additionally, the t-value was 21.47 and the P-value was 0.001. Consequently, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurements of grammar skills, in favor of the post-measurement.

- **Concerning mechanics skills**, the research group mechanics skills mean score on the pre-test was 3.34 and the standard deviation was 1.29, while the mean score of the post- test was 5.61 and the standard deviation was 0.69. Furthermore, the t-value was 11.67 and the P-value was 0.001. So, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post measurements of mechanics skills, in favor of the post-measurement. The previous results are clearly shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Difference between the mean scores of each writing sub-skill on the pre and post writing skills test



As shown in table 3 and figure 4, there were statistically significant differences between the mean score of the research group on the pre and posttests on each writing sub-skill, in favor of the posttest. Hence the second hypothesis was verified.

Testing the third hypothesis

To test the fifth hypothesis stating, "**the proposed intervention based on graded readers is effective in developing EFL second-grade preparatory stage pupils' writing skills**", Eta square equation (η^2) was used to calculate the effect size of using graded readers on developing EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills.

The effect size is small if the Eta square level is 0.01, medium if it is 0.06, and large if it is 0.14. Results are shown in the following table:

Table 4

The effect size of using graded readers on developing EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills

Writing skills	T-value	DF	Effect size
Content	10.63	43	0.72
Organization	11.78	43	0.76
Vocabulary	3.07	43	0.18
Grammar	21.47	43	0.91
Mechanics	11.67	43	0.76
Overall writing	17.62	43	0.88
Total score	25.07	43	0.94

Results shown in table 4 indicate a large effect of the proposed intervention based on graded readers on the research group pupils' separate and integrative writing skills, as the values of Eta Square (η^2) ranged between 0.18 – 0.91 for the writing sub skills, 0.88 for the integrative writing skills and (0.94) for the total score of the writing test; they were all more than (0.14) as identified by Cohen.

In addition, the researcher used Mac Gujian's Efficiency Equation to calculate the effectiveness ratio of using graded readers as shown in table 5.

Table 5

The effectiveness ratio of the proposed intervention based on graded readers on developing EFL second-year preparatory stage pupils' writing skills

Writing skills	Test	Mean	High score	Effectiveness ratio	Improvement rate
Content	Pre	3.16	6	0.86	40.91%
	Post	5.61			
Organization	Pre	1.99	4	0.87	43.75%
	Post	3.74			
Vocabulary	Pre	5.51	6	0.70	5.68%
	Post	5.85			
Grammar	Pre	4.27	12	0.83	53.41%
	Post	10.68			
Mechanics	Pre	3.34	6	0.85	37.88%
	Post	5.61			
Overall writing	Pre	9.55	34	0.64	45.72%
	Post	25.09			
Total score	Pre	27.70	68	0.72	42.43%
	Post	56.56			

Table 5 shows the effectiveness ratio of using graded readers.

Results indicate the following:

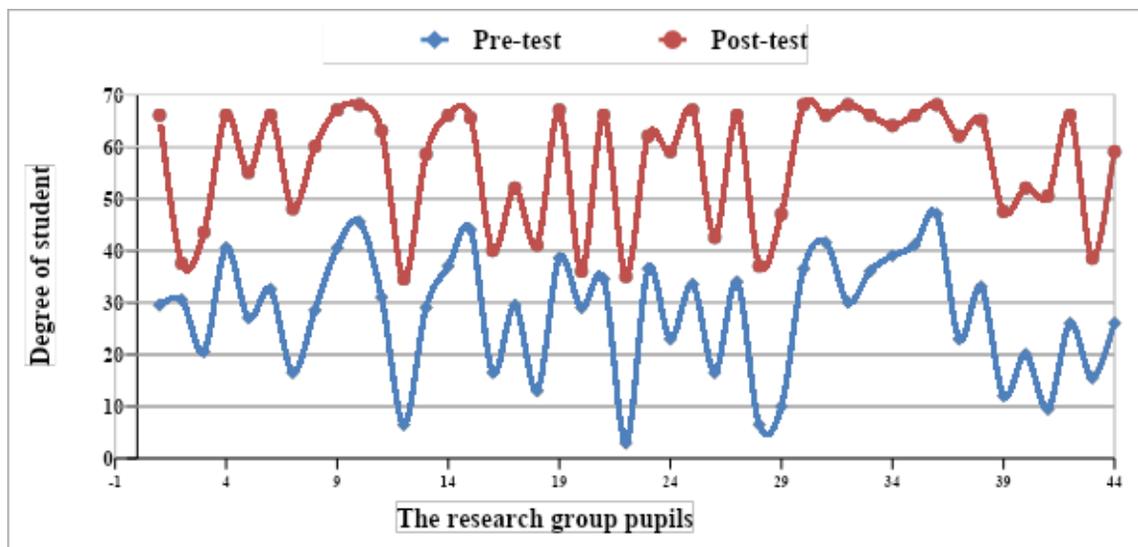
- **Regarding content skills**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.86) and the improvement rate was (40.91%).

- **Concerning organization skills**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.87) and the improvement rate was (43.75%).
- **Relating vocabulary skills**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.70) and the improvement rate was (5.86%).
- **With regard to grammar skills**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.83) and the improvement rate was (53.41%).
- **Regarding mechanics skills**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.85) and the improvement rate was (37.88%).
- **As for the overall writing**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.64) and the improvement rate was (45.72%).
- **As for total score of the writing test**, the effectiveness ratio was (0.72) and the improvement rate was (42.43%).

The results shown in table 5 indicate that the effectiveness ratio of using graded readers ranged between 0.64 - 0.87 for the writing sub-skills, 0.64 for the integrative writing skills, and 0.72 for total score of the writing test. They were all more than (0.6) as Mac Gujian identified. Moreover, the improvement rate ranged between 5.68% - 53.41% for the writing sub-skills, 45.72% for the integrative writing skills and 42.43% for total score of the writing test. Hence, the proposed intervention based on graded readers was effective on developing EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills. Figure 7 indicates the effectiveness of using graded readers on developing EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills.

Figure 5.

Effectiveness of using graded readers on developing EFL preparatory stage pupils' writing skills



Results shown in tables 4, 5 and figure 5 assert that using graded readers had a large effect on developing the research group pupils' writing skills. Therefore, the third hypothesis was verified.

Discussion of the Results

The main concern of the present study was to investigate the possible effect of using graded readers on developing second grade preparatory stage pupils' EFL writing skills. The above- mentioned results indicate that graded readers were highly effective. Such results can be attributed to the various techniques and learning

experience provided for the target participants; reading and writing activities such as predicting, brainstorming, building up, cutting down, summarizing, modified cloze activity, describing, reading journal, commenting, peer editing and rewriting. Such activities could stimulate pupils' motivation and develop great enthusiasm for reading and writing.

Results, also, indicated that the research group achieved significant gains on each sub-skill and overall writing on the writing posttest. Such results are line with the results of Bakeer (2011), Mermelstein (2015), and Park (2015) which reported the effectiveness of using graded readers in developing EFL writing skills. However, the five skills did not improve at the same rate whether through discrete or integrative measurements. Regarding discrete measurement, while grammar skill showed the highest improvement rate, vocabulary skill showed much lower improvement rate. Content, organization and mechanics came in the middle rank. As for integrative measurements of overall writing, grammar skill remained at the highest improvement rate; this may be due to external factors; that is, students not only receive explicit instruction on how to construct and write good sentence, but teachers also pay more attention to teaching grammar when teaching English as a foreign language. While the organization skill got the least improvement rate; that is organization is very advanced ability which is difficult to be mastered through a seven-week course. Finally, the research group achieved a remarkable improvement in overall paragraph writing. Therefore, graded readers led to significant improvements in the research group pupils' knowledge and performance on the post- administration of the study instruments.

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