

Developing Writing Skills for Undergraduate Students: Constructivist Approach Teachers' Perspectives

تنمية مهارات الكتابة لطلاب الجامعة: المنهج البنائي وجهات نظر المعلمين

مرشح للدكتوراه **Rania Hafez**

Faculty of Arts Helwan University

الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على فاعلية استخدام أسلوب القراءة والكتابة المتكامل مع تطبيق مبادئ المنهج البنائي في تنمية مهارة الكتابة لدى طلبة الجامعة. اعتمدت الدراسة نهجا نوعيا من خلال إجراء مقابلات شبه منظمة. أجريت المقابلات مع مجموعة من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية الذين قاموا بتدريس مهارات مختلفة في اللغة الإنجليزية في مؤسسات مختلفة حول العالم. المشاركون من جنسيات مختلفة ويختلفون في الخبرة في المجال التربوي. تم إعداد مجموعة من ١٠ أسئلة لغرض هذه الدراسة. تم اعتماد التصميم الوصفي لتفسير الردود التي تم الحصول عليها من المقابلات. قدم تحليل الردود نظرة ثاقبة على جوانب مختلفة من تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب غير الناطقين بها. وخلص إلى أن تطبيق نهج متكامل للقراءة والكتابة عند تدريس الكتابة إلى جانب استخدام النهج الذي يركز على المتعلم طوال العملية سيكون له تأثير كبير على تنمية مهارات الكتابة لدى الطلاب.

Abstract

This research aims at investigating the effectiveness of using integrated reading-writing approach while applying the principles of the constructivist approach, in developing the writing skill for college students. The study adopted a

qualitative approach through conducting semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with a group of ESL teachers who taught different skills of English in various institutions around the world. The participants are from different nationalities and differ in the experience in the educational field. A set of 10 questions was prepared for the purpose of the present study. The descriptive design was adopted to interpret the responses obtained from the interviews. Analysis of the responses provided insight on different aspects of teaching English to non-native students. It is concluded that applying an integrated reading-writing approach when teaching writing along with employing the learner-centered approach throughout the process would have a significant impact on the development of the students' writing skills.

Keywords: integrated reading-writing approach; constructivist approach; writing skill; ESL teaching.

Background

Learning English as a second language is vital and has become a requirement for all Arab students in order for them to be able to succeed in their college studies, on different levels, and also to be able to have a successful career in the different disciplines whether in their own home countries or in any other country around the world.

Teachers of English a second language are required to teach the different skills of the language. In many cases, one teacher takes the responsibility of teaching all the skills to a certain group of students. In other cases, students are taught the different skills by different teachers. Throughout the education system stages starting from primary stages until high schools, students in the Arab world are taught all the skills of the language by the same teacher on a grade level. When joining colleges, students can be subjected to be being taught the language skills by different teachers. Of all these skills, the writing skill is usually considered by the students to be the most difficult skill to master. The main problem the students face when writing is that they have to incorporate different skills to come up with a native-like final product. This is extremely hard to achieve if they are dealing with the skills of the language separately. This is usually attributed to a variety of reasons. First, Arab students tend to transfer their first language skills to the second language practices. Second, students usually do not show interest in practicing writing as it requires them to dedicate time and effort to become better at writing. In addition, in order for the students to master writing, they need to have in-depth knowledge about the language.

Based on the significance of mastering other skills before writing, teachers of ESL have started incorporating

teaching reading and writing skills together. In Matsuda 2003, it was indicated that teaching writing through reading is of positive impact on mastering the writing skill. Reading gives inspiration to the students on their writing topics through introducing new ideas and vocabulary. Most students complain about the lack of ideas and vocabulary, which hinders the production of any piece of writing. Separating reading practices from writing practices is a hindrance to the development of the students' abilities to learn any language in general, and this separation hinders the development of the writing ability in particular.

Literature Review

In Olajide (2010), the author has investigated the effect of teaching reading and writing together on the outcomes of the students' writings. The author stated that both reading and writing are very important skills of the second language. Students usually have problems with developing their writing skills due to many factors such as lack of ideas and vocabulary needed for expressing their ideas. In addition, students showed that they do not have the required knowledge to write about different topics. They also have problems with the use and application of the grammatical rules they study in grammar classes.

Olajide has investigated the impact of complimentary teaching of reading and writing. It was found that the use of

this complimentary approach facilitated the learning process for the students and made them able to produce well-structured pieces of writing. It was recommended to teach reading and writing interactively in ESL classes. This results in effective learning of both skills. Students are able to acquire what they are taught in the reading as they have to apply it to the writing, and the use of what they were taught in writing reinforces what they acquired in reading.

In Akdal & Sahin's 2014 study, the effectiveness of using the integrated approach of reading and writing teaching has been investigated. This study was conducted on the fifth-grade students. The authors have examined the extent to which using this intertextual approach would affect the development of the writing skills of the students. The study was based on the experimental design as the researchers had two groups of students; one control group that was taught using the traditional strategies of teaching writing and a second group that was taught through the reading-writing integrated approach.

The data indicated that the test group had higher scores than the control group. The students showed improvement and better development in the areas of originality of ideas and the richness of vocabulary used in their writings. As a result, it was concluded that the use of reading as a medium to teach

writing is effective and leads to the development of the students' writing skills.

The effect of using process writing on the development of students' writing skills has been investigated in Bayat (2014). The author has applied a quasi-experimental design to the study. The research was conducted on first-year students studying to be preschool teachers. The data was collected through pre-tests and posttest. The study itself lasted for 10 weeks.

It was concluded that the use of process writing is recommended for developing the writing skills of ESL learners. Process writing is not only concerned with final product produced by the students, but it also focuses on the different activities carried out during the whole process. It was found that the different activities enhance the students' abilities to think critically and analytically, to outline and organize their own ideas, to relate their ideas in a coherent manner, and to apply the grammatical rules through editing activities. Hence, ESL teachers are advised to apply the process writing strategy in their ESL classes.

In 2010, Nikitina has investigated the extent to which the constructivist approach is useful in teaching ESL language and its effect on the acquisition of the language and mastering its skills. It was indicated that this approach is a learner – centered approach to teaching. The student is considered to

be the engine of the learning process. This approach was recommended for usage in teaching ESL for a number of reasons. First, this approach advocates learning strategies through the use of meaningful contexts. Second, it promotes the use of different problem-solving activities as these activities assist the learners to build their own knowledge through interaction with their peers. Therefore, it is beneficial to apply this approach in ESL classrooms.

However, it was indicated that there are certain problems that teachers face while using this approach. First, teachers have to reach a balance between promoting their learners' autonomy and maintaining a well-structured framework for the learning process at the same time. The assessment of learners' development has to cope with the different strategies used in the teaching process. Traditional assessment methods have proved inaccurate to evaluate the development of the students while conducting the learner-centered activities.

The same topic was examined in a number of other studies. In Fox-Turnball & Snape's (2011) study, the effectiveness of applying the constructivist approach on the learning outcomes has been examined. It was concluded that the use of this approach results in better learning outcomes, and the students become more capable of developing the different skills of the language. In the same year, Scheer

(2011) has indicated that the use of the constructivist approach has a considerable impact on the students' learning, and the development of the different skills.

In Kang, Choi, & Chang (2007), the authors have a complete review on the development of constructivism and its impact on the field of education through a full decade. The study tackled constructivism from two dimensions; a retrospect review and a prospective one. It is stated in the review that focus on constructivism in research has shifted from the theoretical and philosophical approach to the practical and applied one. When it comes to the application of constructivism, a number of instructional methods tend to manifest themselves such as Problem-Based Learning, Project-Based Learning, and Inquiry-Based Learning. The review showed the impact of IT development on the advancement and transformation of Constructivism. Constructivism is considered to be the theoretical basis for the e-learning approach, being the approach that promoted education in an alternative environment.

In Lee (2010), the author has examined the use of the constructivist approach by new teachers in a preparation program and compared them to the experienced teachers who are applying this approach. The author has stated that the constructivist approach can be applied in the learning process through following and applying a number of

principles in the classrooms. These principles include encouraging and accepting student autonomy, initiation, and leadership; allowing student thinking to drive lessons and adapting content and instructional strategy based on student responses; asking students to elaborate on their responses; allowing wait time after posing questions; encouraging students to interact, both with the teacher and with one another; asking thoughtful, open-ended questions; encouraging students to reflect on experiences and predict future outcomes; asking students to articulate their theories before requiring them to present understanding of the concepts; and looking for students' alternative conceptions and designing lessons to address misconceptions.

The study concluded that teachers must have adequate preparation on the use and application of the constructivist approach in the classrooms. They should receive proper training on the methodology of applying this approach and integrating it into their teaching practices. It is concluded that the more well-prepared the teachers are, the better learning outcomes are evident in the teaching process.

Methodology

The Qualitative Approach

According to Flick (2002), the qualitative approach is:

“An endeavor to catch the feeling that exists in,
and that structures what we say in regards to

what we do; (b) an investigation, elaboration and systematization of the significance of an identified behavior; and (c) an illuminative representation of the importance of a delimited issue. The qualitative approach does not involve one single means, and very diverse points will be achieved by various interpretative methodologies”. (p. 76)

Qualitative approach was applied as it is appropriate for the purpose of this research. Qualitative research was convenient as it allowed the researcher to study the new trends and make hypotheses concerning a single point or topic. It allowed the researcher to have in-depth insights concerning the topic studied: “In qualitative research, a single research problem may be applied and understood from different qualitative perspectives (e.g., client, counselor, and community)” (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 259). This research includes field observations and interviews that address questions about the use of technology inside and outside the classroom. The benefits of qualitative research are further supported by others such as “....., qualitative data gathered from face to face interviews, field observations, and document analysis” (AlYahmady & Alabri, 2013, p. 181). These can lead to deeper understandings of social issues than a quantitative analysis can”

Participants

The researcher conducted interviews with seven ESL teachers in order to know their own perspectives concerning the use of the reading-writing teaching integrated approach. The participants in the interview included three male teachers and four female teachers. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with five teachers who have taught writing to ESL learners in different universities around the world. These teachers have different levels of experience, cultural backgrounds, and teaching methodologies. The teachers were selected randomly and were informed that the interviews are conducted for the purpose of research, and they were also informed that all the identities are to be anonymous.

Interview Protocol

In the current study, the researcher has followed the semi-structured interview as a set of ten questions has been prepared prior to the meeting, and participants were asked the same questions in the same order. Specific questions that allowed participants to answer in detail were needed to more comprehensively cover the topics in a qualitative manner without getting confounded and distracted. The duration of each interview ranged from twenty to thirty minutes.

Data Analysis & Discussion:

The interview was conducted with a group of teachers as the second part of this research. The purpose of conducting the interview was to gather practical information related to the perceptions of the teachers who have been teaching writing as a skill of English. The interview included ten questions for the participants. In total, seven teachers took part in the interview. When reflecting on the results of the interview, we can see that the participants have an experience in teaching English as a second language ranging from ten to twenty eight years. This indicates that all the teachers who took part in the interview have a significant amount of experience in the field of teaching; consequently, their response would be valuable to this research. Respondents to the interview questions worked in different institutions and different universities around the world; including Kuwait, Turkey, Serbia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Russia, Egypt, Poland, and USA. The common factors is that all of them have taught Arab and non-Arab students. Therefore, they would be capable of identifying the problems that Arab students face more accurately. Based on the responses, they have experience working with students in different stages of education; mainly high schools and college students. All the respondents share the same experience in teaching the different skills of language as all of them have reported that they have taught all the language skills including reading,

listening, writing, and speaking; but mostly writing. Some of them also indicated that they have also taught grammar and phonetics in some of the courses.

When asked to reflect on their approach of teaching the writing skills to their students, the teachers gave different responses. Some of them reported that they followed one process which included providing the students with sample texts of writing, then analyzing these samples for structure of this writing genre, and asking students to produce their own writings guided by the samples they have analyzed. Some of them reported that they have used modeling, practice, and activities. They relied on feedback in order to make the students understand the process, structure, and format of writing, and then the students could produce their own writing pieces. These replies indicate that teachers do not follow a certain clear methodology that is required by any of the universities they have worked in. Instead, each teacher has been responsible for adopting his/her own approach of teaching based on his/her own teaching philosophy.

Upon asking their opinions about the most effective approach when teaching writing in order to achieve the learning outcomes for the writing skills, teachers gave different responses. Two of the teachers responded that the process approach is the most effective one as it helps the learners to understand and learn writing by systematically

following certain steps which makes the learning process easier and more manageable for the students. This approach includes showing the students the different steps of writing, then going through them step-by-step, then giving exercises to the students asking them to write, and then giving them feedback on their writings. The rest of the teachers gave different ideas also about the best approach to teach writing, which involved bringing their techniques in teaching writing based on the students' needs. It is clear that, through their answers, the feedback given to the students is of crucial importance.

As motivation is a key factor to the success of the students' learning, teachers were asked about the different ways they employ in their classes to motivate their students. Once more the responses of the teachers were totally different from each other's, as one teacher reported that praise is the best technique of motivating students. Another teacher reported that game based learning is one of the best ways to motivate students to pay attention in class. Some of them said that some of the students are intrinsically motivated, and, in this case, it is easy to maintain their levels of motivation just by showing them how they can become great writers and achieve better results in the future. One of the answers that was given by two of the teachers is that using topics that students can relate to and can be of interest to them.

When teachers were asked about the difficulties that they face when teaching writing to the students, they said that there are different types of difficulties. First of all, the native language has an effect on the learning of the English language as the students tend to transfer all the structure from their native language to their second language. The second most common difficulty faced is the lack of vocabulary and ideas that students can use in writing. Teachers reported that a lot of students do not have sufficient vocabulary for them to be able to write a complete and comprehensive paragraph about any given topic. The third problem is lack of motivation; as a barrier to learning the language in general and writing in particular.

In relation to the preference between using the learner-centered approach or the teacher-centered approach, five out of six teachers clearly stated that student-centered approach is better for the Arab students. However, one of the teachers reported that teacher-centered approach is sometimes better based on the teacher's personality. It was explained that when a teacher has a good personality, he/she is able to attract the students' attention and make them focus on the material being taught to them to master the writing skill. According to the same teacher, using a learner-centered approach could lead to other problems; especially if there are some weak students or when some students tend to drift away

from the lessons main focus and start socializing and wasting time instead of learning and helping each other to reach the learning outcomes.

When asked about their opinions whether teaching writing through reading could be effective and lead to better results, all the teachers agreed. The teachers said that definitely reading could be used as the basis for teaching writing because reading would allow the students to gain the vocabulary that they need for writing, and it would be more beneficial for the students if the reading texts chosen are based on the students' needs and their requirements for college studies. It was also reported that reading could provide the students with models for them to follow, and this would make them master the writing skill more effectively. It was also reported that teaching writing through reading would enhance the students' futures, especially when they have to start writing research as research is based on reading in order for the students to produce a written report.

As technology has become an integral part of the teaching process now, teachers were asked in the interview to identify the different technological means that they are applying throughout the course of their teaching. Most responses included that teachers use computers, projectors, PowerPoint slides, smart phones, and tablets. Meanwhile, some teachers reported that there are other different means of

technology to be used in the classes and that is dependent on the students' literacy level in terms of technology. It was also reported that in some answers that the teacher can use different online platforms such as applying different online games like a Kahoot, bamboozle, and quizzes which help the students to master their learning and to test their ability to apply what they have learned in the classes.

Hence, it can be inferred from the answers of the interview questions that writing teachers follow different approaches when they are teaching their students in different places. This indicates that most workplaces like colleges and universities do not require a certain approach to be followed when teaching the writing skill in English. It can also be inferred that writing is one of the skills that require a lot of work and patience and integration of different methods in order to motivate the students to write. It can also be inferred that one of the most problematic areas for students when they are learning to write is that they have insufficient wealth of vocabulary and ideas to express themselves. It is also evident that teachers believe that using a learner centered approach would lead to a better and more effective learning for the students; specifically if the teacher knows how to motivate the students. Teachers also believe that using the reading-writing integrated approach when teaching writing would facilitate the teaching and learning of the skill. This goes in

line with the subject of this research as it is hypothesized that teaching writing through reading would help students to achieve better learning outcomes in the writing skill.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the perspectives of ESL teachers on teaching writing as skills in general and on using the reading writing integrated approach in particular. It was evident based on the data collected from the teachers through the interviews that there is a unanimous consent among them that the use of the integrated reading writing approach in teaching college students will definitely be of immense benefit to the students as it will help them to overcome many of the problems they usually face when writing. ESL teachers believe that using reading writing integrated approach would be more effective than using any of the commonly used approaches in teaching writing as employing reading as a foundation to practice writing will help students overcome the problems that they usually face when they are practicing the writing skill.

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