

Improving EFL Learners' Writing through Reading

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Abstract

The current study investigates the impact of integrating short texts (ST) to teach writing to first year EFL students at Batna 2 University. To get reliable data and ascertain the impact of ST on writing, a quasi-experimental quantitative approach has been implemented and an experiment was carried out with 80 students divided into two groups, 40 in the experimental group (EG) and 40 in the control one (CG). The materials used are short texts related to the writing syllabus followed by multiple activities and tasks to improve their writing abilities. The results revealed that students who were exposed to reading short texts showed better results in improving their writing skills.

Keywords: Reading, Short Texts, Writing, EFL Learners

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Introduction

Mastering the writing skill is one of the goals that most learners of English, either as a second (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL) aim to achieve. Similarly, writing is considered one of the hardest and most complex skills to grasp, especially at the early stages of learning (Ploeger, 2000). One of the main reasons underlying this complexity and difficulty is the lack of exposure to the foreign language. Besides, learners should have a good command of many language aspects and skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics to be able to write appropriately meaningful and accurate passages. That is why both of Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (2006) insisted that the mastery of the writing skill turns out to be achieved at late stages for both native and non-native speakers of the foreign language.

At the first-year university level, Algerian EFL students are taught different essential elements and principles of writing. They start learning how to write simple short units of written discourse like simple sentences, and then they move to more complicated and long units like paragraphs. Although students are familiar with many types of paragraphs like the expository, descriptive, and narrative, they face a myriad of problems when assigned a task of writing. According to my own experience as a teacher of English for more than twelve years, students always complain about common issues such as how to start, what to write, lack of appropriate vocabulary and

ideas, and ignorance of grammar rules to write accurate and meaningful sentences. Moreover, lack of motivation is another dilemma that faces students when writing in the foreign language. To find solutions to the above mentioned issues, it is suggested that reading could be one of the supporting skills to enhance writing.

Review of Related Literature

It is true that the four language skills are classified into receptive and productive, but this classification does not separate each skill from the other ones. For instance, learning about the writing skill should not be in isolation from the other skills of the language because there is a strong relationship between all of them. Although this relationship between one skill and another is different, the ultimate aim of learning all of them is encouraging learners to communicate effectively using the target language. In addition, it is more effective to look at these skills with an integrative standpoint. In this line Harmer (2007) stated: "Receptive skills and productive skills feed off each other in a number of ways. What we say or write is heavily influenced by what we hear and see" (p. 266).

When talking about the relationship between reading and writing, we must shed light on the difference between both of them first. It is agreed upon that reading is one of the most crucial skills that has a great importance in humans' everyday activities. Wallace (1992) stated: "Reading is so much a part of daily life for those of us who live in literate communities that much of the time we hardly consider either the purposes or processes involved" (p. 5). Accordingly, reading sometimes is practiced unconsciously, since it is done on a regular basis in societies where most of people are educated. Similarly, Tribble (1996) pointed out that reading is a crucial skill that we need; no one can deny that we need to read different stuff during the process of our ordinary activities such as: news on television or newspapers, letters, bills, and many other related matters. On the contrary, we usually write when there is necessity, or when there is an obligation to write (p. 11).

In addition, the skill of reading is sophisticated because the reader is always actively interacting with the text (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010). The process of reading requires the contribution of a group of cognitive skills like thinking, predicting and reasoning (Gates, 1949). This means that the reader while reading a passage is constantly asking questions and trying to answer them to comprehend the text. Moreover, According to Wallace (1992), the reader-writer relationship is not restricted to communicating a certain kind of message or idea to particular type of readers. In fact, this relationship is more than what has been said to include predicting the standing and view of the reader, on a given topic, from the part of the writer.

Krashen (1984) stated that there is a strong positive relationship between reading for pleasure and being a good writer; in other words, the more the reader enjoys what he reads and the more he reads a lot in this way, the more his/her writing improves. According to this view, the first factor to ameliorate the writing skill is the reading skill; and the second factor is the way this reading is done. Krashen (1984) went further to pretend that contrary to what the common idea

among individuals entails about improving writing through much practice of writing is not correct and reading influences writing more than writing per se does. This statement is proved through many conducted studies that displayed that the effect of reading on writing is stronger than the much practice and the frequency of writing on improving the quality of writing (p. 4).

On the other hand, Knoeller, C. (2003) argued that reading comprehension abilities of learners are fostered thanks to creative writing about literature, this fact is true because creative writing according to him/her deepens understanding of formal analysis. Hence, Dean (2004) argued that the relationship between the two skills is overlapping and a complex one; for instance, reading for educated people is taken as an urgent need contrasting to writing which they experience only when necessary. On the other hand, one way of evaluating reading competence is done over writing (p. 74).

From all what has been said before, we can conclude that the skills of reading and writing are complex and cannot be separated easily. Besides, the relationship between the two skills is overlapping. In this line, Graves et al. (1998) stated "reading and writing are natural companions, two activities that both build on and reinforce each other" (p. 29). However, many studies and researchers focused on the positive impact of reading on developing writing, which will be the interest of the current research paper.

Aim of the Study

The current paper aims at exploring the effect of integrating short texts (ST) in developing the writing skills of first year EFL students. Moreover, it aims at providing EFL teachers with strategies and solutions to enhance the writing skills of learners.

Research Question

The present study considers implementing texts as an effective pedagogical tool to boost learners' writing and increase their motivation. As a result, the study endeavours to answer the following question:

Can short texts (ST) be effective to improve the writing skill of EFL learners?

Methodology and Research Design

A research design according to Miller (1984) is: "The formulation of a plan for collecting relevant data" (p. 2). Accordingly, the research design is the general framework and plan of the research. It includes all the methods, the procedures, steps, followed by the researcher to collect data and address the research problem. To answer the previous research question, and to find out the cause-effect relationship between variables, the present study adopted a quasi-experimental quantitative design.

Participants

The participants of the present study are 80 first year student enrolled in the department of English at Batna 2 University. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 and have been studied English as a foreign language for almost seven years. They are both males and females divided randomly into two equal groups.

Data Gathering Tools and Procedures

The researcher carried out an experiment and relied on data provided by the pre/post-tests to reach out results. In the two tests, learners are asked to write paragraphs, which were corrected and assessed later. The experiment lasted for a whole academic year. During this period, the researcher was teaching the control group in conventional ways whereas she was using texts to read with the experimental group. Each text was followed by a set of tasks to reinforce the five areas of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Data Analysis

A- Results from the Pre-Test

Table 1: Pre-test Results

Pre-test Scores	Final Group	Number	Mean	Mean Difference
	Experimental	40	6.37	0.07
	Control	40	6.30	

Table 1 above summarises the results obtained from the pre-test for both EG and CG. The means of the two groups are low; this indicates that learners of the two groups have similar weaknesses in writing in the five criteria. In addition, the difference between the means of the two groups is not significant (0.07), the fact that proves that learners of the two groups have similar level before the beginning of the experiment.

B- Experimental Group Results of the Pre-and Post-tests

Table2: Results of the Pre-and Post-tests of the EG

Rubric	Number	Test	Total	Mean
Content	40	pre-test	47	1.18
		post-test	110	2.75
		difference	63	1.57
Organazation	40	pre-test	47	1.18

		post-test	101	2.53
		difference	54	1.35
		pre-test	60	1.60
Vocabulary	40	post-test	114	2.85
		difference	54	1.25
		pre-test	55	1.39
Language Use	40	post-test	107	2.68
		difference	52	1.29
		pre-test	40	1.15
Mechanics	40	post-test	101	2.53
		difference	61	1.38
		pre-test		

It is noticed on the table 2 above that there is always a significant difference in the value of the means between the pre-and post-test in the five areas of content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. This difference ranged from 1.25 (in vocabulary) to 1.57(in content). The results indicated that subjects of the EG showed a positive improvement in writing and this could be ascribed to the treatment they went through.

C- Control Group Results of the Pre- and Post-tests

Table 3: Results of the Pre-and Post-tests of the CG

Rubric	Number	Test	Total	Mean
Content	40	pre-test	44	1.10
		post-test	87	2.18
		difference	43	1.08
Organization	40	pre-test	46	1.15
		post-test	85	2.13
		difference	39	0.98
Vocabulary	40	pre-test	59	1.48

Language Use	40	post-test	94	2.35
		difference	35	0.87
		pre-test	56	1.40
		post-test	90	2.25
		difference	34	0.85
Mechanics	40	pre-test	46	1.20
		post-test	87	2.18
		difference	41	0.98

Results in the above table displayed the difference in the value of means between the pre-and post-tests of the control group. It is obvious that the means of the post-test are higher than the ones in the pre-test; however, the improvement is slight and it ranges from only 0.85 (in language use) to 1.08 (in content). This indicates that the subjects of the CG still have problems in their writing abilities.

D- Results of the Experimental and Control Groups in the Pre-and Post-tests

Table4: Results of the Pre-and Post-tests of both EG and CG

	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental Group	6.37	13.32
Control Group	6.30	11.07
Difference in the Mean	0.07	2.25

Data on the table above summarizes the means of the different tests that Experimental and Control group have gone through. Results demonstrate that the pre-test, which was the initial test, displayed the equality of level of the two groups 6.37 for the EG and 6.30 for CG, and the mean difference was only 0.07. However, the post-test results displayed better results in the EG, which achieved a mean of 13.32 compared to CG, which reached a mean value of 11.07. With these two values, the difference in means seems noticeable (2.25). Hence, it is evident that the two groups showed improvement in paragraph writing; yet, the outcomes of the CG appear to be limited if we compare them to those of EG.

Discussion

Results from the post-test showed that the paragraphs of participants who undertook the treatment improved more significantly than those of participants who did not. The main objective of the experiment is to address the research question. In other words, the researcher/teacher aimed to find out the efficacy of the integration of short texts in enhancing the writing of EFL students in terms of content, organisation, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Results of the pre-test of the EG and CG revealed that learners face an array range of hindrances when writing paragraphs. Since the scope of the study is limited to problems related to the content, organisation, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, the researcher focused on scaffolding learners' paragraphs according to these five language aspects. The value of the means of the two groups (EG and CG) in the pretest were approximately equal (6.37 and 6.30, respectively), and the scores obtained by the subjects of the two groups displayed weakness in the five aforementioned defined areas. The fact that justified the implementation of the treatment provided to the EG. This latter received a set of selected short texts to read. Students had to read the text which presented a given topic and implied a specific theme related to the syllabus. Afterwards, learners were assigned a bunch of tasks and exercises. Yet, the last assignment was a production of a paragraph that was thematically related to the text.

The treatment was divided into four phases, each of which aimed to address one or two of the five identified areas of writing. In the first phase, the researcher's objective was to support the content area, and the second was to scaffold the area of organisation. Likewise, the researcher in the third phase gave more attention to developing the area of vocabulary, and the last phase of the treatment was addressed to support the two areas of language use and mechanics.

The effectiveness of the treatment was checked by conducting a post-test on the two groups (EG and CG). It was mainly based on comparing the means of the pre and post-test of both groups. In this test, participants of the two groups had to write the same paragraph. Afterwards, the produced paragraphs were scored. The outcomes showed a significant difference between the achievement of the two groups. Hence, the implication of the treatment yielded positive results and the integration of ST proved to impact positively the quality of writing of the EG participants.

Recommendations

After presenting, analysing, and discussing the research results, it is of utmost importance to provide some valuable recommendations. The latter will be mainly restricted to practices and suggestions related to teaching writing for first year EFL learners. Thus, In the light of the aforementioned, the research endeavours to suggest the following recommendations.

First of all, teachers are recommended to update their teaching methods and use new ways, strategies, and means to enrich the input in class and hook learners' attention and interest. short texts are some of the means that they can use to innovate their ways and techniques in teaching and to bring an atmosphere of fun and motivation to writing sessions.

Moreover, teachers should work to address areas of weakness regarding students' grammatical competence. Although not all researchers and scholars agree on the effectiveness of teaching explicit grammar, Krashen (1984) claimed that direct grammar instruction should not be entirely excluded since writers still need grammar items that help add some adjustments to language acquisition. According to him, those adjustments are helpful in the editing process, and the best grammar teaching should be limited to those elements needed in writing, such as knowing differences between language patterns such as "its, it's", "their, there ", and so on (p. 35). In coherence with this, teaching grammar and written expression would save more time and effort if syntax and language structure difficulties that appear more frequently in paragraphs of students can be treated by providing more grammar instruction.

In addition to scaffolding grammatical skills, practice is a crucial element in the success of improving writing. Therefore, we recommend that teachers devote more time to enabling learners to work on their writing inside the classroom. To be more efficient, this practice should be accompanied with appropriate feedback. Regarding this point, Hyland (2003) insisted that effective feedback should focus only on learners' significant errors and address input dealt with in class. So, with more practice inside the class and feedback on assignments done at home, learners will be able to recognise their errors, and writing will become easier. These two results were proved in the current study, whereby the researcher noticed that the amount of practice provided to the EG had its positive impacts. Practice enabled learners to start writing their paragraphs in a shorter time compared to participants in the CG, who were offered less practice and less feedback. In this context, Ploeger (2000) emphasised that the most problematic point before writing is to get started and find an idea to write about. This step is tough for the writer, and it consumes most of his/ her time.

Another recommendation is addressed to Algerian EFL learners; they had better increase the amount of their daily reading and engage themselves in more extensive reading activities. It is proved by research that reading boosts writing skills. In coherence with this, Krashen (1984) insisted that writing is based on reading and reading provides writing with appropriate rules and conventions of the language; thus, the writer acquires grammatical rules of the language through extensive reading. Reading would improve not only the general quality of learners' writing but also other aspects related to paragraph development like vocabulary (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985); extensive reading enables learners to grasp an array range of new words that can be used later in writing. In addition, regular and constant reading provides learners with plenty of ideas and boosts their creativity. It is worth mentioning that reading is a cognitive process that engages many mental capacities such as thinking, reasoning, analyzing and the like; therefore, if learners are involved in purposeful, extensive reading, they would ameliorate their cognitive abilities and more than this, their metacognitive capacities, by which they can identify their own strategies to better learning. Hence, learners are advised to select appropriate authentic texts, short stories, and the like to keep interested and gain the required knowledge.

Conclusion

Writing a paragraph for first year EFL learners is a problematic area that needs careful attention from teachers and students alike. The findings of the study at hand confirmed the efficacy of employing short texts as powerful pedagogical materials for improving the writing competence of learners using the experimental approach. However, the same study could be carried out with a different population and different research design.

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