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Exploring EFL's Effective Writing Strategies at Intermediate Level

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Abstract

Many students find difficulty in writing. Teaching writing is more difficult than teaching other language skills especially to EFL students because the students have limited knowledge of the foreign language and they do not have enough experiences in it. Writing is not an easy task, for this reason, the present study aims at highlighting and suggesting some strategies to provide the students with information and to help them to write successfully. It also aims at developing students' knowledge about writing effectively and encourage them to gain confidence and overcome the difficulties. The present study hypothesizes that the new strategies for writing have a good and positive impact on the students' performance. The procedures used in the current study are summarized as follows: A theoretical background of the writing process and effective writing in general is presented. Collecting new strategies for writing from different

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available sources to help student to overcome the difficulty in their writing. The study concludes with some suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Writing, EFL, Strategy, windy thinking.

استكشاف استراتيجيات فعالة للكتابة لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية

للمرحلة المتوسطة

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المديرية العامة للتربية نينوى

المستخلص

يجد الكثير من الطلبة صعوبة في الكتابة حيث يعد تدريس الكتابة المهمة الاكثر صعوبة مقارنة بالمهارات اللغوية الاخرى وخصوصاً لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية وذلك لأن الطلبة لديهم معلومات محدودة للغة الاجنبية وليس لديهم التجارب الكافية فيها. الكتابة ليست بالمهمة السهلة ولذلك تهدف هذه الدراسة الى اقتراح بعض الاستراتيجيات التي تزود الطلبة بالمعلومات وتساعدهم للكتابة بنجاح.
الكلمات الدالة: الكتابة، الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية، تفكير عاصف.

1. Introduction

Teaching writing is considered a standing problem. Teachers all over the world complain that their students cannot put three words together. This difficulty may be due to the students' limited knowledge and insufficient practicing in the foreign language. In fact, mastering correct writing is a complex matter and requires time and effort. According to Mohammed (2021), pupils will get more information and be more intelligent if there is a use of methods and strategies in second Language. However, this study tries to answer the following:

1. Will teaching writing by using some strategies help the students to overcome their difficulties and lead them to better language?

1.1 Effective writing: Introduction

Effective writing is a good writing which is based on clear thinking. We cannot write unless we have a sensible saying. Conversely, clear thinking depends upon the careful use of language. Good writing is a combination of opinion and fact, but practically speaking, more fact than opinion is desirable in most student

writing (Gallo and Rink, 1973: 86) see also among others (Hazem 2015; Hazem 2017; Kamil 2020 and Salman et al 2022).

Any natural language includes four complex skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Writing is a complex one which involves the practice of a number of very different abilities, some of which are never fully achieved by many students, even in their native language (Harris, 1969:68).

However, Heaten (1975: 138) summarized the varied skills which are necessary for writing a good prose into four areas; they are as follows:

1. Grammatical skills: (the correct use of language).
2. Stylistic skills: (the effective use of language)
3. Mechanical skills: (the correct use of spelling and punctuation) and finally,
4. Judgement skills: the ability to write in appropriate manner for a particular purpose with particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organize and order relevant information.

Actually, it is argued that the mastery of the process of writing and reading is essential to the development of general capacity to think (Hill, 1978: 892).

Valette and Disick (1972: 181) outline that the receptive skills; listening and reading, and the productive skills; speaking and writing are the four basic skill categories. They emphasize that writing skill usually involves external behavior on the part of the students (ibid: 171). Finocchiaro (1973: 137) goes further and states that no skill is developed without a continuous and intensive practice. No skill can be maintained unless it is used frequently. Grasso and Maney (1975:2) state that writing is like any skill that can be learned in stages and steps. They add: “You can learn to say what you mean when you write and to say it well”.

Raimes (1983: 5) makes a brief distinction between the productive skills, speaking and writing, explaining that writing is the most complex and complex of language skills. Accordingly, he states that speaking is universal and the speakers use their voices and bodies to convey their messages, but writers have to rely on the words on papers to express their meaning. Speaking is unplanned, the speakers use punctuation. Also, in writing, it takes time and we can go back and change what is written. Finally, speakers use simple sentences connected by a lot of “and’s” and “but’s”, writers use more complex sentences by using the cohesive devices.

Rivers (1981: cited in Arikan, 2006: 5) gives a further extension to the issue by saying that writing cannot be developed in isolation, but it should be taught and developed in cooperation with other skills, and as a result, the developed writing skills cause improvement in students’ essays.

Waston (1982: 5) has another point to add, he comments: “traditionally, it has been assumed that a sure way to learn to write well, whether in your first language or another, is to imitate the style of those generally regarded as successful writers”

It is important to realize that writing is the record of our ideas (Zamel, 1982: 197) and it is the process through which meaning is created conveying initial ideas gets extended and refined (ibid: 203).

Finally, writing well or ill is almost purely a matter of talent, genius or instinct. Hence, if there is a subject of really universal interest and utility, is the art of writing one's own language effectively.

It seems clear that ability to write well grows out of prior experience in listening, speaking, and rereading. If the students know what the sentence wish to write sounds like, they are well advanced on their way towards fluent written expression (Allen and Vallete, 1972: 284). For these students, mastering the act of writing takes many years of intensive study to write fluently in a second language (ibid).

On his part, White (1997: 5) summarized the principles of good writing in the following key rules:

1. Be concise – which means to keep the piece of writing short and simple.
2. Be forceful – is to take a stand.
3. Be correct – try to use correct and reasonable details.
4. Be polished – attend to details.

In brief, these rules of writing actually do make the writing clearer and easier to follow. They help the writer to reach the reader and make the text seems smooth and the thoughts being more clearer.

Finally, the skill is how to use the words effectively and accurately in a way that enables the reader to understand the meant meaning of the piece of writing.

Some researchers like Imhoof and Hudson (1975: 6) state that the most important and essential thing to a student's success is the ability of how write well, grammatical, meaningful, organized, and concise paragraphs. The student should arrange the relevant facts and opinions according to suitable and acceptable patterns of paragraph structure.

2. Writing Process

Written communication is the ability to use the conventions of disciplinary discourse to communicate effectively in writing with a range of audience, in a variety of modes, persuasion, exposition,...etc. (ww9,2006: 1).

Written communication can be defined as the exchange of information through letters, words and sentences (Camp and Satterwite, 2005: 5). Language has a communicative dimension that is difficult to dispense with. It gives us feelings, subconscious perceptions, and an inevitable attitude towards the speaking voice which helps us evaluate the claims being made (Hill, 1978: 886).

Accordingly, writing in addition to being a communicative skill of vital importance, is a skill which enables the learner to plan and rethink of the communication process. It, therefore, provides the learner with the opportunity to focus on both linguistic

accuracy and content organization (Murcia, 2001: 207). Moreover, viewing writing as an act of communication suggests an interactive process which takes place between the writer and reader via the text. Hence, a person can communicate a variety of messages and such communication is extremely important in the modern world (ibid).

To conclude, writing as a communicative activity needs to be encouraged during the language learner's course of study.

Moreover, Camp and Satterwite (2002: 18) explain that written communication requires a writer and reader. It is most effective when the sender has good writing skills and the receiver has good reading skills. What is important is that written communication should be limited to one main purpose. Two or more main purposes within a message can cause Confusion or can make one idea seem more or less important than another (ibid: 33).

The goal of 'writing to communicate' is to involve a reader in his/her own process of discovery. As a writer, the student's responsibility will shift from gathering and organizing facts and information to presenting the information and facts in the most efficient manner. At this stage, the students communicate their own thoughts and feelings in writing. They express their minds not because they have been instructed to do so, but because they want to (Valette and Disick, 1972: 172).

Finally, writing to learn and writing to communicate are both integral parts of the writing process. It is very hard to achieve excellence in the latter without putting forth major time and effort in the former. The more the student thoughtfully practice writing, the sharper his/her skills will become (See also Salman and Hazem 2022).

Writing is a complex phenomenon because writers have to negotiate all the elements of the writing process: writer, reader, text, reality, etc. and construct written discourse accordingly. For this reason, writing is considered a particular social material arrangement in which written expression and communication take place (Schmitt, 2002: 253). It has dual functions: expression and communication; functions both personal and public, internal and external to the self (Simpson, 1978: 935; Kamil and Hazem 2020).

Cody (2006: 9) emphasized that language is an art essentially different from any of the other arts. He adds that the language which expresses the thoughts with strict logical accuracy is a correct language, and the language which is sufficiently rich in its resources to express thought fully, in all its lights and bearings, is an effective language. If the writer has a sufficient stock of words and forms, he/she has only to use them in a strictly logical way and with sufficient fullness to be both correct and effective.

Going further, Hemphill (2002: 1) asserts that writing is one of the most powerful skills that will develop during the educational experience. He states that during this phase of writing process, the student will be in a position of trying to explain the material only to himself/herself.

Hemphill calls this type of discovery writing as "writing to learn". On the other hand, Hemphill illustrates that it is later during the interactive revision process of reading, editing, and proofreading that the student should change the focus and switch to the "writing to communicate" mode.

2.3 Writing Power

Every paragraph should have unity. It is a very important principle in writing effective paragraphs. This term is defined by many researches as the oneness of topic and purpose, i.e. all sentences in the paragraph deal with one subject and one purpose. Vivian and Jackson (1961:32) explain that "unity means to present one single central idea. A good criterion of unity is when any piece of writing develops one specific idea and every paragraph or sentence should fit organically into the pattern of the whole". Another definition presented by Kinsella (1969: 46) "unity means that every topic and subtopic must be logically related to a central idea, no material should be introduced that digresses from the clear development of the central idea". Kinsella adds that if the writer throw into the paragraphs ideas or facts that are not logically related to the topic, he/she has violated the unity principle.

On their parts, Ohlsen and Hammond (1970: 3) comment that the student should be sure that each sentence is related to the topic of that particular paragraph. Also, all other sentences in the paragraph should support the main idea, creating paragraph unity (Camp and Satterwite, 2002: 334).

In sum, unity is a key characteristic of good paragraphs which emphasizes that all the sentences in any paragraph are linked together and related directly to one single idea (Johnston, 2000: 53). Al-Khuli (1979: 183) presents another important feature of a good paragraph which is clarity. It completes unity. Clarity is achieved when all the words and grammatical structures are clear. So, the students should not use any ambiguous structures or words and make sure that everything in any paragraph is understood and clear.

An effective paragraph is not only unified but also coherent. Unity deals with the relationship between the topic sentence and each of the sentences follow. Coherence involves the relationship that occurs from sentence to sentence within the paragraph. These sentences must flow together and must be woven together. When the reader moves easily from one sentence to the next one without feeling that there are gaps, that means the paragraph is coherent (McGrimmon, 1963: 82).

Moreover, Van Dijk (1977:93) examines the semantic relationship between sentences and defines coherence as "a semantic property of discourses, based on the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences. In this sense, the paragraph seems to need some words or phrases to ease the movement of the prose and make the separate facts stick together. So, this quality is called "coherence" (Gallo and Rink, 1973: 58). On the other hand, Emery et al. (1982: 245) and Johnston (2000: 54) both emphasize that a good paragraph reads

smoothly, following from start to finish without choppiness or confusing jumps and gaps. One important thing that should be taken into consideration is that most learners of English as a second language face difficulty in using appropriate connectives to achieve coherence in writing. Some writers like James (1983: 251), suggest that the main source of difficulty lies in the difference between rhetorical systems of the two languages. In details, this difficulty appears to stem more directly from the restricted knowledge of linking words in English language (*cf.* Kaamil and Hazem 2019).

3. **Discussion and conclusion**

The Present part is basically concerned with the discussing and explanation of the strategies that are used to develop the writing skill at intermediate level. It is also concerned with the results of using the new strategies to write effectively.

3.1 **Effective writing strategies**

Many teachers recognize that the students need help to write successfully. So, the teachers have to learn the students' new way of thinking about writing. This study suggests some new strategies in the process of writing to help them create and achieve the main purpose behind effective writing. Accordingly, the study provides the students with details for writing the introduction, body and conclusion.

The strategies are as follows:

1. **Gathering the ideas and information:**

In this step, the writer has to collect and determine the ideas, and to decide which ones are important.

2. **Identifying the main points:**

The writer must learn how to state the main points effectively and to choose the suitable expressions to shape the text.

3. **Planning the writing:**

The writer still needs to make a plan before begins to write. It helps the writer to organize ideas in the best order to convey the meaning to the readers.

4. **Windy Thinking:**

The most difficult task for many writers is 'what they are going to write'? Brainstorming is an activity which aims at helping the students generate ideas and then combine them into effective sentences (Maley, 1988: 34). The object in brainstorming is that to write down and word or an idea that come to the mind, then thinking of an effective way to link between these ideas to form sentences (White, 1997:65).

In addition, Barnwell and Dess (1995: 163) and (www10, 2006: 8) state that in this technique, the writer should never mind how trivial or even silly the words or idea appear; just he/she should get them down and they will probably be used later.

After the writer has written everything that occurs to his/her mind, he/she binds the ideas and assembles them into several topics. Then jettison all other strange or irrelevant ideas. Finally, the writer will see that many of these ideas will open a starting point to discuss in the paper (Adams and Saintsburry, 2005: 1).

On his part, Raimes (1983: 10) points out that this technique can be used in the class or groups or individually on paper. He adds that the student, in this stage, should think and focus on the ideas and never worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar (ibid 69). For more details about strategies, see (Kanaan et al. 2022).

What is important is that, Brainstorming is similar to free writing, but the main difference between them is that free writing takes on a format that looks something like a paragraph, while Brainstorming usually result in a list of words. Also, in Brainstorming, is not necessary to keep writing continuously, it is just writing down the idea that are relevant to the topic. So, many writers prefer Brainstorming because it is easier for them to work with a list of separated ideas instead of paragraphs (Ghaith, 2002: 24).

5. Be free

“Free writing is writing one paragraph or more” (Al-Khuli, 1979:179). It is the ability to put large numbers of words and sentences on paper without being too selective about what gets written down. The whole process depends on freedom to write. The main goal is to be able to record ideas randomly and freely without fear or hesitation (Emery et al., 1982: 222).

It is another technique to help the writers to come up with ideas and information. The aim of free writing is to generate ideas and let the words themselves suggest other words. It is very easy to keep writing in a certain topic until you feel that the mind has been cleared (ibid). Jwell (2004a: 2) describes free writing as the creative method that usually starts after choosing the topic.

Hunt (1995: 62) goes further and comments that this Tanique is and exercise in unruliness. The only rule is that, the writer must keep the pencile moving forward constantly, as White (1997: 57) states; ‘Just keep those little fingers moving without stopping’. Soles (2007: 8) also adds that the writer should not stop to take stock or to consider whether what has been written makes sense or would be the reader. Maley’s point of view concurs with the others. He points out that because the main feature of this technique is writing as quickly as possible without stopping, it is also called “speed writing” (Maley, 1998: 44). He completes his opinion by saying that, “At a late stage, quality can take over from quantity in a process of selection and redrafting”.

6. Mind Mapping

Because clustering, which is also called “mapping” or “mind mapping”, is visual in nature, it is difficult to explain in words. It allows the writers to generate and organize ideas in a visual context. It consist of using circles and lines to show connections between ideas (Ghaith, 2002: 25).

White (1997: 66) mentions that this technique in also called a “word web”. It helps to generate ideas by showing how one idea leads to another. To make a cluster, simply write the topic in the center of the page and draw a circle around it. Then, write down the related ideas, words or phrases and circle them then, use lines to connect between them. For example, Margarita has to write an essay on” A person who

influenced me”. She has decided to write about her grandmother. Hence, she made this cluster to develop her ideas.

7. Changing Topics

In this technique, the student may use the classmates. Simply, because this technique requires to write the topic on a paper and then pass this paper around the classmates. Their comments and feedback will provide the writer with new angles and perspective to the topic. Using this technique, the writer can get new information and various ideas (ibid).

8. Interview

Raimes (1983: 73) calls this technique “interview” in which the teacher and the students exchange the information. This technique can be used inside the classroom between the students and teachers or between the students themselves. It requires gathering evidences, information and organizing them (Ghaith, 2002: 29). Later, the discussion can help the students to think about the ideas in a new way.

9. Writing as dialogue

In this technique, the writer can write as though he/she is talking loudly to him/herself. If the student or writer needs an idea, simply by asking a question and resuming the conversation. Using short, quick answers can help keeping ideas flowing. This can be fun and effective (ibid).

10. Restricted Writing

It is the opposite of free writing. It is useful tool easier to mark and much less time-consuming, so more can be assigned. In controlled writing, more is given to the student: A model to follow, a paragraph to complete, or a passage to continue (Raimes, 1983: 95).

Raimes adds that controlled writing can be divided into five types: controlled composition, question and answer, guided composition, parallel writing and sentence combining. Each one has a value. They are important as Raimes comments: “They provide practice in a specific feature of the written language or the process of writing (ibid: 96).

4. Conclusion

This study has come up with the following conclusions: first, Teaching writing using some strategies has a productive effect on the students’ performance. Second, the role of the teacher is very important to provide the students with information and confidence. So, the teachers must teach students how to write good and effective sentences. Third, the students are in need to develop their information and acquiring the writing skills by thinking how to close the suitable vocabularies and gather & shape the ideas logically. They have to read more and more to help themselves for meaning full writing.

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