

Developing Iraqi EFL Students' Essay Writing Ability through Using the Brainstorming Technique

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ABSTRACT

This investigative study sought to explore Iraqi EFL secondary school students' use of brainstorming techniques to improve their essay writing competency. Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, which stresses group learning, influenced the qualitative research. Therefore, in order to get students ready for future writing phases, the teacher advised them to engage and distribute information in their pre-writing. Three approaches of data collecting—that is, the semi-structured interview, document analysis, and observation—were used. EFL students were asked permission; they were questioned and their written essays were examined. Additionally they were interviewed and their lesson watched by their teachers. According to the results, students find it difficult to generate ideas for their essays; so, creating essays with inadequate introductions, weak concept support, and bad conclusions becomes challenging. Students' comments clearly revealed that they struggled with planning. While some of them did not follow thoughts as stated on the mental map, others did not prepare before writing. It follows that poor instruction of essay writing led to difficulties for the students. Students were almost ready to complete official assignments. They did not practise independent writing and were seldom involved with interactive learning techniques.

Keywords: Strategic brainstorming, pre-writing exercises, essay writing techniques, editing and proofreading.

تطوير قدرة الطلبة العراقيين على كتابة المقالات باللغة الانجليزية من خلال استخدام تقنية

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الملخص

يجد متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مثل محمد وسعدون (٢٠٢٠) صعوبة في العصف الذهني لأنه الفعل التلقائي المتمثل في ملاحظة الأفكار استعدادًا للعديد من مراحل عملية الكتابة. سعى هذا البحث إلى استكشاف استخدام متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العراقيين لتقنيات العصف الذهني لتحسين كفاءتهم في كتابة المقالات. أثرت نظرية البنائية الاجتماعية لفيجوتسكي (١٩٧٨)، التي تؤكد على التعلم الجماعي، على البحث النوعي. لذلك، من أجل إعداد الطلاب لمراحل الكتابة المستقبلية، نصحهم المعلم بالانخراط وتوزيع المعلومات في مرحلة ما قبل الكتابة. تم استخدام ثلاثة أساليب لجمع البيانات - أي المقابلة شبه المنظمة، وتحليل المستندات، والملاحظة. طُلب من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الإذن؛ وتم استجوابهم وفحص مقالاتهم المكتوبة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تمت مقابلة معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومراقبتهم للدروس. وفقًا للنتائج، يجد الطلاب صعوبة في توليد أفكار لمقالاتهم؛ لذلك، يصبح إنشاء مقالات ذات مقدمات غير كافية ودعم مفهومي ضعيف وخاتمت سيئة أمرًا صعبًا. كشفت تعليقات الطلاب بوضوح عن أنهم واجهوا صعوبة في التخطيط. في حين أن بعضهم لم يتبعوا الأفكار كما وردت في الخريطة الذهنية، فإن آخرين لم يستعدوا قبل الكتابة. ويترتب على ذلك أن التعليم الرديء لكتابة المقالات أدى إلى صعوبات للطلاب. كان الطلاب على استعداد تقريبًا لإكمال المهام الرسمية. لم يمارسوا الكتابة المستقلة ونادراً ما شاركوا في تقنيات التعلم التفاعلية. الكلمات المفتاحية: العصف الذهني الاستراتيجي، تمارين ما قبل الكتابة، تقنيات كتابة المقال، متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة إضافية أولى.

1. Introduction

Essay writing is a vital ability as it allows students articulate their ideas and opinions in writing form. and is related to the development of language acquisition that lets students interact successfully (Shields, 2010). Crystal (2012) therefore shows that a student who wants to effectively satisfy communication in essay writing must utilize the target language precisely, convey, and arrange thoughts clearly. Agreeing with Lewis and Strong (2020) said that students have to understand that

essay writing entails not only the process of finding ideas in the text but also to put words on paper, choose, and arrange thoughts by considering numerous elements. However, more specifically on brainstorming, students should be taught, encouraged, and routinely evaluated on essay writing competence if they are to master the technique. Students who are deprived of the chance to create thoughts on the assigned subject sometimes find it difficult to produce logical and thorough phrases. Teachers should provide their students the required tools for brainstorming and mentally map writing. A prewriting exercise called brainstorming helps students structure their ideas and enable them to participate in writing by means of their thinking. By means of the brainstorming technique in the teaching and learning process, students' prior knowledge is activated, new ideas and interests are generated, motivation is raised, and even psychological influence is created (Tomlinson, 2001).

But second language students' declining writing abilities need emphasis on how writing is taught. Many classroom teachers utilize unsuitable writing tactics as they have poor knowledge of the writing techniques. As a result, students exhibit a number of issues include delivering essays with loose material, incorrect sequencing, and poor concept arrangement (Vaughn and Bos, 2012). The bad arrangement of concepts shapes the message students transmit. In line with the foregoing, Leong and Austin (2006) believe that as writing calls more time and attention, it is the most difficult ability to develop. professors often lament not having enough time to gradually train and help students to raise their essay writing quality. A research by Salma (2019) clearly shows this. According to Salma's results, students regard essay writing to be an easy chore; however, the researcher underlined the need of giving greater weight and practice for these abilities in settings. Nevertheless, the language teachers lack sufficient time to help students

with classroom writing exercises. Students therefore find it difficult to generate logical articles and ideas. Thus, this study should investigate the brainstorming technique in improving essay writing abilities of students in order to conscientise stakeholders in education to cooperate to solve the issues students encounter.

2. Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory

The researcher adopts Social Constructivist Theory developed by Vygotsky (1978) to direct his work. According to the learning theory known as social constructivism—which holds that students perceive, communicate, and understand reality via frameworks like language and culture— That is, learning how to write an essay is transferred via language interpreted and understood by experience and interaction within a classroom.

In this paper, the social constructivist theory focuses on the students' acquisition of the brainstorming approach in essay writing to generate an essay revealing efficient idea production, precise language, excellent structure, and appropriate content of written texts. Students are seen as active co-constructors of knowledge and meaning. Emphasizing assessment as an active process of revealing and equipping shared knowledge, the theory stresses the idea of guidance as it builds a teacher-learner relationship, seeks to engage students in challenging but worth trying essay writing activities (Jacobs et al., 2020). What a learner absorbs is vital throughout the essay teaching and learning process; the teacher's job is to help students reach information beyond their level by means of efficient evaluation. Constructivism as an educational philosophy stresses, according to Mackenzie (2007), that teachers should take into account the essay writing previous knowledge of their students and expand on it to enable them to utilise their knowledge in practice to generate a better essay. Teachers should educate how to come up with concepts and regularly assign students to

create more difficult works. Understanding the difficulties of the essay writing of the students and the recommended suitable instructional help requires an awareness of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding ideas related with Vygotsky's theory.

Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as the difference between the degree of potential development found by a learner working alone to solve a problem and the actual developmental level established by a learner directed by the teacher or in cooperation with competent peers. Scaffolding is the help and direction given to a student by a teacher or a more informed individual. The two ideas are related in that as students grow within their ZPD, they become confident to approach writing assignments with the support of peers or an teacher (scaffolding). Strategic relevance rests on knowing the ZPDs of the students. It affects how educators use scaffolding strategies to help students produce better essays. Understanding the ZPDs of the students helps to optimize the chances for learning so that they may achieve their best possible performance (Pulsford, et al., 2023).

The researcher therefore argues that teachers use the ZPD and scaffolding to make sure students follow the writing processes. Students should be grouped and assigned a theme in the planning period. They have to talk about the theme, exchange thoughts, create a mental map. They would be conversing and learning from one another by so behaving. Every student should create their first draft using the mentioned mental map. Students are supposed to arrange their phrases logically to form cohesive paragraphs fit for the essay they are writing. They should help each other to proofread, edit, and improve their manuscripts. Finally, students should start writing their last essays.

Seel (2021) verified that Vygotsky developed the ZPD idea as a mostly creative solution for the problem that learning must be linked with the degree of development of the child. This implies that when students

acquire the basic ideas of an essay and techniques applicable to fresh essay assignments and challenges, their improvement in essay writing becomes evident. Therefore, the researcher argues that teachers should assess the past knowledge of essay writing of the students, expand on what they already know by grouping them, and let them participate and help their learning. This might improve their current understanding to help them to properly prepare by means of concept generation prior to essay writing.

Dochy and Segers (2018) maintained that students need greater social engagement if they want to attain full ZPD. When working with others, the students' rising ZPD rely more on their successful social interaction to acquire more information and enhance their essay writing abilities than when working alone. This makes the theory and its principles pertinent to this research. They helped the researcher to list the difficulties, reasons, and remedial techniques for enhancing the essay writing abilities of the students. The research could provide teachers a clear outline of how to enable students to actively engage and meet their essay writing objectives by facilitating and mediating learning in classrooms.

3. The Statement of the Problem

Much research has been done on essay writing reveal that pre-writing stage of essay writing challenges students (Faez and Wyatt, 2024). Pre-writing strategies in teaching writing are used seldom which are usually accompanied with a problem of idea generating, language inaccuracy, poor organization and inadequacy of the contents of written texts that have significant effects on students' proficiency writing; the studies show that students encounter problems when required to systematically start to write a text; they get difficulties expressing their ideas in words or sentences; they tend to be bored and are less motivated to learn writing. Hyland (2019) claims that time restrictions,

thus teachers tend to set aside the relevance of pre-writing especially if they need to cover a syllabus over a limited period of time. Writing difficulties are not only caused by the students themselves, but also by the diverse and boring techniques the teachers used in teaching writing. Not enough chances exist for students to produce essays in the classroom (Fletcher-Wood, 2018). Therefore, the research revealed the current discrepancy among students in the classroom when it comes to essay brainstorming. With Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement in mind that emphasizes that the senior phase is, to most unlucky students, the conclusion of compulsory school, this research thus attempts to explore brainstorming approach in improving essay writing abilities of grade 9 students. Most students either continue vocational paths or look for employment after grade 9. Therefore, it is essential to make sure that students in senior face have the ability to write as it will be quite vital for their post-school activities.

4. The Importance of the Research

The findings of this research might shed light on the relevance of brainstorming techniques and the reasons behind the difficulties faced by students in essay writing for many educational stakeholders. The DBE should plan long seminars to properly equip trained English teachers in using brainstorming techniques to improve the essay writing skills of their growing students. This might also help to decrease the senior phase lower performance rate.

5. The Questions of the Study

The study addressed the following key research questions:

- 1 • What difficulties secondary school students have in writing an essay?
- 2• What are the reasons behind the difficulties in essay writing of students?
- 3• Which techniques find application in the classrooms?

6. Method

6.1. Sample of the Study

The sample included secondary school in Misan (for the study year 2024) province makes up the research environment for this project. make up the sample for this research. Secondary school students ranging in age from 15 to 17 years made up the sample, along with their English language teacher. Since homogeneous purposive sampling is a kind of purposive sampling, which let the researcher choose the subjects with comparable characteristics like their language background and so provide the data suitable to respond to the research questions.

6.2. Data Collecting

The semi-structured interview, document analysis, and observation methodologies used in data collecting let the researcher personally meet with the subjects.

• Study of Documents

This approach let the researcher examine the written works of the students. Students underwent an essay writing exam to use the technique. The essay style was an argumentative one headed: "Education is key to success."

The researcher went over their noted scripts. Marking helped the researcher to pinpoint the difficulties students had generating essay topics.

• Semi-Structured Interview

The interviews were personalized prepared. To gain understanding of how students are taught, evaluated, and how the teaching and learning process influences their essay writing abilities, the researcher spoke with secondary school teacher (who taught them at school). The study included eight students. The six students include those who scored level 1 (0–29%) and two who scored level 4 (50–59%). The two students were asked to make sure the level 1 achievers were not stigmatized.

Although the students answered in English, the researcher clarified the questions in their original tongue—Arabic. This let students properly express themselves and grasp the questions.

- **Observation**

The researcher used another tool of measurement to have a thorough idea of the teaching situation in the class; where he watched the secondary school teacher using the observation schedule to note her observations. This allowed the researcher to investigate closely the instructional strategies and how they helped students to be creative and imaginative writers. The class ran around sixty minutes. The researcher may see the teacher's interactions with students by means of a table set for him in front. The observation had no effect whatsoever on the daily classroom operations. The researcher did not engage personally with the subjects.

6.3. Data Analysis

The content analysis was used for the document and observation data; the thematic data analysis was applied for the interview data. The data from the interview, observations, and documents came from many sources therefore their analysis would not be suitable using the same method.

6.3.1 Thematic Examination

Data compilation comprised phase one. Here the researcher familiarized with data. Written the interview data, went over and reread it, and noted the first thoughts. To create first codes, the second step broke apart data. The researcher gathered and merged data pertinent to each code after systematically coding fascinating elements of the data throughout the whole data sets. The researcher clearly and meaningfully arranged the data. Looked for themes; compiled programs into possible themes; acquired all pertinent information for every possible theme.

The third step understood data. That is, themes were examined and evaluated whether they functioned with respect to the coded extracts (phase 1) and the whole data set (phase 2), and then summary of the study was prepared. The researcher defined and gave names for topics. She continued to analyze data in order to improve the details of every topic. The whole narrative of the study was articulated to provide exact titles and meanings for every topic.

The complete procedure was ended in the fourth step. That is, the researcher examined data, gathered a few chosen instances, completed the analysis of the chosen extracts, and connected the analysis to the study issues. Subsequently, an academic report on the analysis was generated.

6.3.2 Content Analysis

a. Analysis of Essay Scripts

Examining the essay writing scripts of the students, the researcher categorized the developing themes and formed inferences from the coded information. The following elements found in the student essays: the formation of ideas in a mind-map was assessed, flow of ideas in sentences and paragraphs, which lets the reader comprehend the major points and its structure (introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and ending paragraph). Students should view the essay as a process. More specifically in the pre-writing stage, they were supposed to follow the guidelines for essay writing.

b. Examination of Observational Data

The researcher arranged the field notes according to certain topics to categorize the data systematically. This kind of data analysis allowed the researcher to understand and summarize the course of the lecture or lesson. This included problems the participants may not have brought up during the interviews, including the lack of knowledge to guide essay writing as a process rather than a result. This approach helped the

researcher to surpass the impression derived from grasp of personal knowledge.

7. Interpretive Analysis of the Results

As told earlier, this study aimed to investigate how second language students may use their brainstorming techniques in essay writing. Following results from observations, document analysis, and semi-structured interview data collecting process:

7.1 Information from Sources Including Papers

Students' writings clearly showed that they lacked the ability of brainstorming, which influences their works. They turned in essays with bad conclusions, weak supporting structures, and inadequate openings. Following the concepts shown in the mind map turned out to be the main challenge for the students. They so battled with paragraphing, particularly the introduction section. Their concepts in every paragraph lacked any logical link between one another. Once again, their scripts revealed that their opening lines lacked arresting aspects meant to grab the reader's interest. Its mistakes impede the creative flow.

7.2 Information Extracted from Observations

Part of the approach to solve problems is brainstorming, which generates creative ideas free from criticism. It is the way the students' free association of numerous concepts. Some researchers develop their state of mind to solve difficulties. In terms of content and arrangement, mechanics of writing, language usage, and creative development, brainstorming helps the students to improve their creative writing abilities. Cognitive capacities (fluency, adaptability, inventiveness, and elaboration). It motivates students to express themselves honestly in writing and participate actively in the learning process. Consequently, the results of this study reveal that the process of essay writing for the students depends on brainstorming. The teacher urged students to pair off their ideas during the class observation. Clearly, brainstorming

allowed them to exchange ideas and grow personally as most of them found working alone difficult.

Effective group brainstorming of ideas enabled students to grasp the subject matter.

At the same time, Experts (2020) said that by using brainstorming, teachers inspire students to consider the theme and enable them to access different ideas. It is said that teachers who answer the concerns of the students about the lack of ideas in writing utilize brainstorming to inspire their thoughts and urge them to start. That is how the study's teacher persuaded students to organize their essays. The teacher pushed students to cooperate to exchange opinions on the theme. Furthermore supporting this is the theory used in this research, which stresses classroom learning by means of interaction

7.3. Data from Semi-Structured Interviews

7.3.1 Students' Writing Encounters

It is usually said that students had no understanding how to keep to the essay subject, so they found it difficult during interviews. Teachers should so carefully educate process writing to improve the essay writing ability of their students. Dombek and Herndon (2004) back up the aforementioned conclusions because students produce essays with inadequate opening, weak supporting structures, and bad conclusion. Interviews conducted in this research revealed that the subjects said that,

Teacher P1

“Students struggle, I have seen, with using pertinent material that advances the theme. Written plans are not well-defined. They overlook sequential organization of the thoughts or occurrences.”

Participant L2 presented her concern this way.

“My issue is with words. Usually, I find the issue difficult and have no clue how to properly arrange my views.”

Participant L3 acknowledged this as well.

“Writing from the thoughts I developed on the mind–map challenges me.”

Clearly, students find it difficult to create a coherent essay as their thoughts are not well organized. Liach (2011) emphasized that poor motivation and ignorance of grammatical elements and vocabulary items cause students to struggle in learning writing. Once again, the following answers of the participants reveal that lack of efficient preparation causes students to find it difficult to produce logical and cohesive essays. Many cogent mistakes in their sentences and paragraphs impeded the development of ideas and meaning. Students produce essays with ineffective introduction, inadequate support systems, and bad conclusion, therefore; According to Hyland (2019), coherence suffers when students struggle with brainstorming. Their main concern was paragraphing. particularly in regard to the introduction. Their concepts in every paragraph made no sense whatsoever. The learner's first paragraph does not have any arresting elements to grab the reader's interest. Its mistakes stop the thoughts from flowing.

7.3.2 Reasons behind the Difficulties Students Experience

Since writing is the means of communication in the classroom and at the school and a significant determinant of academic efforts, students should pay great attention to this ability (Gelati et al., 2014). Goller et al. (2021) claim that several types of writing techniques are needed for students to utilize in class. Still, the employment of techniques must be in line with pragmatic activities to help students become comfortable writers. Inadequate practical work in the classroom therefore results in writing difficulties for the students. Once again, Fisher et al. (2016) underline how little time teachers have dedicated to writing; 19% of them do not provide their students with chances to produce texts in the classroom. Students also stated in this survey that they are not often

given essay writing assignments. Their frequency of receiving essay writing assignments was enquired upon them. They underlined the following:

Participant L1 said that,

“We are not taught essay writing techniques. I find it difficult sometimes to organize concepts on a mental map. Furthermore, we lack sufficient essay writing exercises. Usually, we just provide formal assignments without any kind of practice writing exercise.”

Participant L2 advised that most of the time I run out of ideas and that I get anxious while writing.

Participant L4 clarifies that our lack of instruction in class is probably the reason.

Participant L5 said thus: We learn nothing in class about essay writing. We do not engage in personal writing. We only compose an essay when we are assigned a project.

Participant L6 answered thus: Not planning the mind map before to starting my article.

The teacher also verified that students are not routinely taught and evaluated in essay writing. She was questioned about her frequency of evaluating students and teaching. Once in a term, students are evaluated on essay writing skills under direction from the yearly teaching plan and program of assessment, Teacher P1 admitted that “ I educate them twice a week or twice every semester. It depends on the workload as sometimes I have many seminars to attend, therefore I have less time with my students.”

The findings imply that less commonly taught essay writing among teachers. One may argue that teachers have too much on their calendars to consistently show for their courses. They basically equip students for assignment writing. The outcomes also suggest that, when assigning students writing assignments, the teacher follows the yearly

teaching plan and evaluation program. This suggests that students struggle in writing as they are not provided sufficient practical exercises in the classroom. Still, it is the teacher's duty to make sure they evaluate and instruct students on their essay writing. This is so because the expected essay writing experience exposes the understanding of grammatical rules and their application among students under examination. Should students get an essay writing assignment once a term, they will not develop the necessary essay writing techniques to become proficient and confident writers.

7.3.4 Methodologies of Instruction Used in Essay Writing

Vanslander (2023) claim that teachers neglect to educate their students efficient writing techniques and abilities, thereby causing difficulties for them while writing. Agreeing, Winstone and Carless (2019) say that the strain in writing resulting from outmoded and poor teaching methods causes difficulties for students learning to grasp writing. Encouragement of students to engage with others throughout the writing process will help the teacher to use a brainstorming technique. Groups of students should discuss concepts regarding essays, their goal, organization, linguistic characteristics, and register of the text type. Students have to understand the need of using the correct methods while writing essays to generate understandable works.

Likewise, Winebrenner and Kiss (2017) claimed that the inadequate teaching strategies used in classrooms might be the reason for the difficulties students have writing an essay. Teachers still use the conventional method of instruction, which fails to inspire the students' passion to absorb knowledge and engage actively in the classes. The teacher and students responded as follows when asked about the techniques used in teaching and learning essay writing.

Teacher P1 said, "I teach essay writing using films and pictures to help students envision what the essay is all about...I utilize a projector for students to see photographs I get online. Pictures help my students grasp things better.

Participant 6 said that because we are rather sociable when we are among our peers, peer teaching might help.

The findings reveal that several creative approaches are used by teachers in class to teach essay writing. This encourages students as they start to find attraction in pictures and movies the teacher presents. Still, these approaches are insufficient to provide students with essay writing ability. Lessons seen also clearly showed the teacher using images and videos but lacking the ability to include students in her lecture delivery. Throughout the writing process, students seldom interacted much. The teacher need to have guided students to produce logical and cogent articles by using many instructional strategies. Mastery of process writing would have helped students adjust to brainstorming ideas before writing, drafting, revising, and proofreading. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement stress the writing process. Writing education should therefore include working through the writing process, which entails following procedures like planning, drafting, editing, proofreading, and presentation (Williams, 2017).

8. Conclusion

The research looked at creative approaches to help students strengthen their essay writing abilities. The research found that students' essays suffered from lack of the ability to generate ideas. Some students penned essays without any thought forward. Students sent in essays with bad conclusions, incoherent phrases and paragraphs, and inadequate opening. The researcher's observations, however, revealed that the teacher pushed them to pair off their brainstorming so they can exchange ideas and grow from one another. Still, it is clear they need

additional help and encouragement to follow process writing and use brainstorming ideas. Furthermore supporting the results are Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory, which holds that learning how to write an essay is transmitted via language interpreted and comprehended by experience and interaction within a classroom. Teachers should therefore stress teamwork while students work on process writing, more specifically using pre-writing or brainstorming techniques. Teachers should realize that only if they are actively involved in their own writing process will their students be able to develop into critical thinkers and creative writers.

9– Pedagogical Suggestions

Based on data analysis and study findings, the following is advised:

1. Aiming at improving teacher expertise in classroom management and scientifically certifying them, the government should create a teacher course of training.
2. When developing the syllabus, the requirements and ideas of the students should be included into its scope and objectives. Apart from that, one should consider the present level of the students in secondary schools precisely.
3. Teachers are recommended especially to pay much more attention than ever on written practice as well as to focus on real-life events using actual items.
4. . New courses must be offered in order to replace the very packed ones that compromise the whole educational system; aims, objectives, etc. and to take the current level of the students especially those who are poor in writing skill.
5. Students cannot freely express or share ideas or engage in simple class participation due to very limited class times. Given the large number of students in the class, time must be given to guarantee that every student can easily engage in all textbook exercises and activities.

6. Students should get a lot of practice so they may improve their performance of writing skill.
7. Cultural variation between the languages should be concentrated on in terms of addressing concepts and presenting both cultural material in a closely linked way that enable learning process.
8. English vocabulary is vast; so, teachers should counsel their students to concentrate on the essential words or content words that define the core of English language, since vocabulary plays a vital role in developing essay writing.
9. Students need to be taught that the written and spoken forms of language have no relationship whatsoever.
10. Grammar should be taught and practiced greatly to utilize and apply in real life interactions and genuine situations.

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