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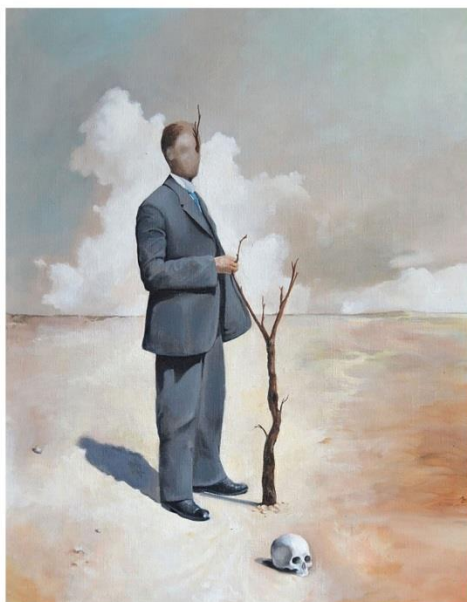
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Literature as a means of augmenting writing skills

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Abstract

Highlighting the contribution literature can make in relation to promoting students' writing skills, the author of this paper designed a literature-based course for study purposes. The statistical tests conducted for the purpose of the study revealed that the experimental group students' performance on the pre-post writing test was significantly better than the control group students' performance. In conclusion, it would be appropriate to use literature as an effective device that university instructors can utilize, to enhance the writing skills of foreign/second language learners.

Keywords: Effective, Writing, EFL, Literature, Skills.

La literatura como un medio para aumentar las habilidades de escritura

Resumen

Al destacar la contribución que la literatura puede hacer en relación con la promoción de las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes, el autor de este artículo diseñó un curso basado en la literatura para fines de estudio. Las pruebas estadísticas realizadas con el propósito del estudio revelaron que el rendimiento de los estudiantes del grupo experimental en la prueba de redacción previa y posterior fue significativamente mejor que el rendimiento de los estudiantes del grupo de control. En conclusión, sería apropiado utilizar la literatura

como un dispositivo efectivo que los instructores universitarios pueden utilizar, para mejorar las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes extranjeros / de segundo idioma.

Palabras clave: Efectivo, Escritura, EFL, Literatura, Habilidades.

1. INTRODUCTION

For English as a foreign or second language students, learning to write effectively is an immense challenge. The students should follow linguistic conventions, write for an unfamiliar audience, and employ rhetorical strategies that the audience may expect. Yet, foreign/second language writing in higher education whatever and wherever the institution, is usually a university requirement that students need to meet apart from their areas of specialization.

Relating the discussion to the United Arab Emirates' context, university students studying in the country are expected to acquire a repertoire of writing skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), amongst other university requirements. With quality education in mind, the author of this paper believes that using literature in the EFL classroom would be of genuine support in terms of promoting writing skills, amongst other gains. This belief supports a number of specialists' recommendations for utilizing literary texts to enhance second/foreign language acquisition (AL-ALAMI, 2018; CARROLI, 2008; CARTER & LONG, 2010; SAGE, 1989). ARMSTRONG (2015) states that the merits of using literature in the EFL classroom

are numerous and have been proven empirically to be an effective mode of instruction. SAGE (1989) asserts that utilizing stories in language teaching has a positive influence within English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Eager to know what will happen next maintains the reader's interest. SAGE (1989) is of the opinion that using novels in the English classroom yields good outcomes. True to life nature of characters; relationships and events, and being emotionally evocative, are amongst the reasons why novels should be utilized in EFL/ESL contexts. DE NAPLES (2002), on the other hand, explains that when students learn how to understand fiction and engage in characters' lives, they usually ask questions about their own lives, not to mention vocabulary; grammar, and patterns of organization which a literary text presents and from which students can learn a great deal.

Based on the aforementioned scholars' opinions amongst other scholars' viewpoints, it can be claimed that literature can contribute to developing writing skills on the part of ESL/EFL learners. Accordingly, this study sought to examine the reliability of this claim by means of English short stories. The author of this study designed and implemented a short-story course. The course adopts the view that literature is a resource rather than an object in itself, thus advocating the use of literature as one of the main resources in second/foreign language acquisition.

The current paper is comprised of five sections, along with references and one appendix. Section two is a literature review within a number of the areas concerned. Section three portrays the current

study, highlighting the study's research questions; proposed treatment; statistical tests; findings and so on. Section four proceeds to propose some recommendations in light of the study's findings, and section five depicts the author's attitude towards utilizing literature within foreign/second language settings. The paper concludes with an appendix, exemplifying some issues of relevance to the current study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Section two of the current paper sheds light on writing skills within EFL/ESL contexts. In so doing, both a number of related studies and pedagogical approaches are presented chronologically. Writing in a foreign/second language can be seen as a challenging requirement. In BURKE's (2010) opinion, there are three main stages of producing a stylistics paper: investigation and selection, analysis, and writing. The first stage should consume a considerable time of reading, whilst considering both a stylistics perspective and an interpretive perspective. The second stage requires deep analyses of the text being discussed. The analyses could be either the learners or an existing one to which learners can refer for guidance purposes. The third stage is the writing-up stage during which learners should finalize their writing and submit the written work.

As seen by O'BRIEN (2004), technology can be implemented in the English classroom using different ways. The way new technology advancements are applied in the classroom has been

influenced by the particular beliefs of each individual teacher and by the institutional context. A salient point in research into the use of technology in writing instruction is the need to question the success stories that characterize many contributions. Word processing, for instance, can be an optimal tool for a process writing approach since it allows for many different kinds of amendments prior to and after saving. Network-based language teaching is another area where technology can be implemented. It refers to language teaching that involves the use of computers connected to one another in either global or local networks.

The use of portfolios for teaching writing skills has been investigated by a number of researchers in the field. For example, SAGE (1989) explored the effectiveness of integrating portfolios into a learning strategy, and explored the effects of portfolios on helping EFL university students to become better as autonomous learners. After two semesters of learning strategies-based instruction, language proficiency tests proved that participants made progress to a passing rate of over eighty percent, compared to fifty percent prior to training. This study, therefore, recommends integrating portfolios into English language courses, implementing frequent portfolio's checking and sharing, and developing guidelines and mini-lessons to help students in improving their written output.

Excluding the discussion to fostering summary writing skills, SAGE (1989) suggests that while teaching summary writing, instructors should make sure that students can recognize the outline, overall organization, main ideas, and main supporting ideas.

Additionally, students should be able to analyze assigned reading passages to gain a better understanding which in turn will provide a clearer insight into what to include, exclude, focus on, marginalize, or omit when writing summaries.

Concerned with co-operative learning in the English classroom, HIRVELA (2000) proposes using writing groups; that is, small groups of students working together on a writing task which involves peer review. Through collaborative group work, students experience valuable opportunities to enhance their ability to read and write, as the on-going community orientation of this approach enables them to consider the strengths and resources of their peers while sorting through their own growing knowledge of EFL/ESL reading and writing.

This section of the paper discusses a number of studies and describes some activities which instructors can conduct within foreign/second language writing settings. It is worth mentioning that there is no best-prescribed activity or approach through which writing skills can be enhanced most effectively. Each of the strategies and procedures outlined in this section has its own value as a stimulus for eliciting appropriate responses. This, accordingly, entails that it is the instructor's responsibility to take account of students' background and knowledge, and to review teaching in the light of experience; a rather daunting task, given contemporary society's predilection for prescribed curricula in English.

3. THE CURRENT STUDY

This section of the paper is intended to report on the study's methodology. To achieve the intended aim, this section presents the research questions first, and then proceeds to discuss the study's design, conduct, treatment, statistical tests, and findings.

This study sought to arrive at valid answers to the primary research question below:

What are the components of a literature-based course, aiming to augment foreign language writing skills of university students?

Based on the study's primary research question, the following secondary research question was addressed within the context of the current study:

What differences are there between the experimental and control groups' performance, on the pre-post writing test?

The following hypothesis was formulated in accordance with the secondary research question above: There is no statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups' performance on the pre-post writing test.

The current study used an experimental design, involving two groups: experimental and control. To ensure study reliability, experimental and control groups have to be similar in terms of all essential aspects. The control group members, however, do not receive the proposed treatment which the experimental group members receive. Turning the discussion to the context of the current study, both groups included male and female students of different colleges who

were enrolled in a general university requirement course, Communication Skills in EFL, during their first university year of study. The two groups included thirty-four students, seventeen each, studying at the university where the researcher works. It is worth mentioning that both groups were similar in terms of essential aspects such as background, language proficiency, year of study, and the like.

The study variables were of two types: independent and dependent. The independent variable was identified as the proposed literature course set and implemented by the researcher, and the dependent variable was identified as the experimental and control groups' performance on the pre-post writing test.

The study sample, as mentioned above, was comprised of thirty-four students studying at a private university in Dubai where the researcher works. Prior to study implementation, the research project went through two stages: piloting the study which lasted for one month, and re-piloting the study which lasted for four months. Lastly, implementing the study took place for four months; that is to say, one academic semester. Piloting, re-piloting, and implementing the study were all conducted by the researcher at the same university in Dubai. While the experimental group students were taught the course Communication Skills in EFL via the proposed literature course, the control group students were taught the course Communication Skills in EFL via a general English language course.

The author of this paper set and implemented a literature-based course for the purpose of this study. The course included fifteen English short stories. All the selected stories illustrate how great

authors can, through their gift for words, guide us to see the world from different perspectives. The course is characterized by its integration of language skills and elements, to attain targets and fulfill requirements more effectively. The reader may at this point inquire why the proposed literature course was excluded from the genre of short stories. It is the researcher's conviction that not only do short stories exemplify effective writing, but they are also authentic materials simulating everyday language use in a number of ways. Additionally, a short story does not usually consume much time in contexts where the time factor is crucial, such as those of foreign/second language classrooms (DORNYEI, 2007).

On successful completion of the proposed literature course, subjects were expected to: read for both information and pleasure, and write for a range of purposes to convey meaning in language appropriate to purpose and audience. To ensure effective writing, subjects were required to: produce coherent pieces of written discourse, employ cohesive devices in a written piece, and utilize literary techniques in writing.

Commenting on course content and organization, each of the fifteen short stories was followed by a glossary and eight main sections. Section one, warm-up, aimed to arouse subjects' interest via means of purposeful activities such as brainstorming. Section two, reading in action, aimed to promote subjects' reading skills in English. To realize this aim, section two was comprised of five sub-sections each serving a particular purpose. Section three, language highlights, aimed to enrich students' knowledge of vocabulary; grammar and

literary techniques. Section four, talking focus, aimed to develop students' listening and speaking skills through provision of oral activities such as debates. Section five, writing workshop, aimed to promote students' writing skills by exposing them to a variety of writing functions and tasks, whilst seeking to simulate genuine life situations. The approach this section employed was that of the writing process. Section six, portfolio work, aimed to improve subjects' writing skills through project work and task-based learning activities. Section seven, values in perspective, aimed to instill in subjects a set of values for lifelong learning. Last but not least, section eight was a self-reflection based activity where each subject was required to fill in self-evaluation checklists provided to keep track of language progress. For details about the proposed course, the reader is advised to refer to the appendix.

The control group students, on the other hand, were taught the course Communication Skills in EFL using a general English language textbook. The textbook included vocabulary, grammar and structure, reading texts, listening and speaking activities, and writing tasks. Briefly speaking, the control group students were taught writing skills traditionally.

To measure the extent to which the proposed literature course was effective in augmenting students' writing skills as opposed to the general English language course, the researcher conducted a pre-post writing test involving the experimental and control groups. The pre-post writing test was based on TOEFL, and was administered to the experimental and control groups prior to and following study

					Lower	Upper			
	Pre-test	-	2.8351	.687	-	-	-	1	.000
	Pos	3.720	6	63	5.178	2.262	5.41	6	
	t-test	59			29	88	1		

Table 2: T-Test of the Control Group

Statistics of Paired Samples					
Test		Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
	Pre-test	5.2647	17	5.90846	1.43301
	Post-test	7.5000	17	1.69097	.41012

Correlations of Paired Samples				
Test		N	Correlation	Sig.
	Pretest & Post test	17	.376	.137

Test of Paired Samples				
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Test	Paired Differences					T	D f	Sig. (2- taile d)
	Mean	Std. deviati on	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
				Low er	Uppe r			
Pre- writi ng Post- writi ng	- 2.235 29	5.5003 3	1.334 03	- 5.063 31	.592 72	- 1.67 6	1 6	.113

As the statistical tests reveal, both groups could achieve progress towards the end of the academic semester, as indicated by their performance on the pre-post writing test. However, the experimental group of students could achieve significant progress. As the p-value for the experimental group (Sig.=.000) is less than 0.05, while the p-value for the control group (Sig.=0.113) is greater than 0.05, it is evident that there was a significant difference between the performance of the two groups on the pre-post writing test, in favor of the experimental group students.

4. FINDINGS

As mentioned in item 3.1, question one was stated as follows: What are the components of a literature-based course, aiming to augment foreign language writing skills of university students? To gain adequate insight into what would possibly make the components of such a challenging course, the researcher sought the wealth of knowledge offered by scholars' contributions within the pertinent literature. Thorough readings of varied references assisted the researcher in designing the proposed literature course. To gain sufficient awareness about the proposed literature-based course, the reader is advised to refer to item 3.4 as well as to the appendix.

Turning the discussion to the secondary research question: What differences are there between the experimental and control groups' performance, on the pre-post writing test? both the experimental and control groups could achieve progress towards the end of the academic semester, as indicated by their performance on the pre-post writing skills. However, the experimental group students could achieve significant progress, which thus proves the effectiveness of the proposed literature course in enhancing students' writing skills.

5. CONCLUSION

Learning to write in a foreign/second language can be a demanding process. For instance, learners seeking to acquire writing

skills in a foreign/second language encounter a number of issues such as using correct syntax, selecting proper vocabulary, generating ideas about a specific topic, and developing functional language skills like proper natural language use in various contexts. It is important; therefore, to note the directions being undertaken by foreign/second language scholars as we look forward to a less compartmentalized academic world.

Taken in sum, it would be appropriate to use literature as an effective device that university instructors can utilize, to enhance the writing skills of foreign/second language learners. Whatever the literary genre, literary texts should be approached as a fruitful resource for augmenting students' writing skills amongst other purposes.

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