

Impact of Competency-based Approach on Writing Skill and Motivation of Pre-service EFL Teachers

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to examine the effects of the competency-based approach on the writing skill and motivation of pre-service EFL teachers. To this end, 80 Iranian intermediate-level pre-service teachers studying at Farhangian University were selected through an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) and were assigned to an experimental group ($n = 20$) and a control group ($n = 40$). The sample included both male and female participants, aged from 18 to 21. Both groups were then given a writing pretest, and then the experimental group was taught based on the competency-based approach, whereas the control group experienced the conventional method of writing instruction. The tasks developed for improving the writing skill of the participants in the experimental group all mimicked real-world activities such as working on job application forms, different parts of an article, a resume, a biography, and so forth. Subsequently, a writing posttest was conducted to measure the achievement of the participants in both groups. After the treatment, a 6-item questionnaire developed by Farrah (2012) based on a 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the motivation of the participants. The findings of a one-way ANCOVA revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group ($p < .05$) on the posttest of writing. In addition, the results obtained by administering the motivation questionnaire showed that Iranian pre-service teachers exposed to the competency-based approach enjoyed significantly higher levels of motivation vis-à-vis their counterparts in the control group. The findings suggest that teachers can take advantage of the competency-based approach in their classes to improve their learners' writing skills and increase their motivation.

Keywords: Competency-based Approach, Motivation, Writing Skill

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an exclusive characteristic of human beings (Berman & Cheng, 2010). Since the early attempts of man for initiating effective communication, writing has been an important source of informing, collaborating, and alerting others (Jones, Retzel & Fargo, 2010). In fact, this skill can be considered an important language skill and an inseparable part of daily life. As it has been known, most business transactions,

records, legal documents, as well as political and military agreements are written by those who are experts in their field with a sound knowledge of writing skills (Serravallo, 2017). However, writing is considered by many teachers to be one of the hardest skills to teach to students that learn English as a Second Language (ESL) (Rao, 2019). According to Nunan, (1999), even most native speakers can never master this skill because it requires the production of a long, coherent, and fluent piece of writing. Alsamdani (2010) has also stated that "writing

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is a challenging process as it involves various skills of thesis statement, writing supporting details, reviewing and editing” (p. 55). In order to produce a relatively “good” piece of writing, a writer needs to have good lexical and grammatical resources and knowledge of organization, coherence, and cohesion in paragraphs. Supporting learners in developing these aspects of writing skills nevertheless can be quite challenging for instructors; however, first, the use of appropriate teaching methods and strategies might assist these teachers in successfully developing those aspects (Rao, 2019). Furthermore, according to a study conducted by Shin, and Crandall (2014), most errors made by EFL writing learners were due to teaching methods and other factors such as limited class time, disinterest, and demotivation on the part of the learners.

Considering the aforementioned issues, teachers should do something to develop efficacious techniques and strategies for writing instruction to promote learners' motivation toward learning L2 writing. Motivation as a key element in the success or failure of any difficult activity can play a significant role in mastering any aspect of a new language (Brown, 2000). In other words, success in any kind of action depends on the extent to which the individual attempts to get his goal, along with his desire to do so (Pourhosein Gilakjani, Leong, & Saburi 2012). Generally, this psychological factor –the impulse to do an action – is referred to as motivation (Lucas, 2010). Motivation refers to the combination of attempts plus the desire to obtain the objective of learning the language besides desirable attitudes towards learning the language. It, therefore, plays a key role in language learning. Without a desire to learn, it is very difficult for learners to attain effective learning (Huit, 2001). It can be stated that teachers should be aware of the significance of motivation in learners' language learning and through some changes they can help learners increase their motivation (Lucas, 2010).

Among the various approaches to teaching L2 skills and components, a competency-based approach is a viable option that can be considered for the development of L2 writing. This approach deals with the things “the learners are

expected to do with the language” (Colley, DeGani, & Stead, 2010, p. 141). The major focus of this approach is on the outcome and output of learning, which can result in the survival of L2 learners in different educational and occupational contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, based on this approach, at the first step, a clear set of learning outcomes is developed and, then, some conditions, opportunities, instruments, and assessment methods are developed around the area of the set goals that enable and encourage L2 learners to achieve those essential outcomes (Docking, 1994).

This study tries to open up a new avenue to improve the learners' writing skill and motivation. The teaching of writing skill must be innovative and attractive in order to achieve effective learning outcomes. Reflecting on the students' problems related to their writing skill, the use of a competency-based approach in teaching writing should be attempted to minimize those constraints on their learning process and improve their motivation in this regard.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As mentioned before, writing skill is a complex cognitive skill, because it requires the learners to employ proper intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, verbal information, language rules, and apposite motivation (Kagan & High, 2002). Talking about this complex skill becomes more complicated when it involves producing sentences in a different language (Troyka, 2010). Some researchers think that writing may just be defined as using or reproducing graphic symbols that have been read or heard before in written form (Pincas, 1992). However, writing can be defined as more than the production of those symbols, just as forming a speech is more than the production of sounds. Klein (1985) defined writing as “the ability to put pen and paper to express ideas through symbols, in this way, representations on the paper will have meaning and content that could be communicated to other people by the writer” (p. 70). According to García (2003), writing “represents words or ideas through images or signs on a paper or other type of support with a pencil or any other instrument” (p.13). In addition, Cassany (1999)

considered writing as “a manifestation of human linguistic activity such as the conversation, monologue or, in a different level, gestures codes or Morse code” (p. 24).

Human beings have kept and shared their knowledge through writing all throughout time. Moreover, a series of complex processes should be conducted in the brain to produce the written texts (Troyka, 2010). Garcia (2003) believed that writing can be produced as a result of a series of sophisticated brain activities that are closely interrelated. Writing can transmit words from the minds of one person to the existential memory of another individual. Writing as a process is composed of different steps and each of these steps can be affected by various factors and techniques. Harmer, (2004) argued that the writing process is marked by four major stages: planning, drafting, editing, and finalizing. According to Harmer, (2004), planning deals with pre-writing and taking notes on the part of the writer. In this stage, writing ideas are ordered through brainstorming or listing. During the planning, writers have to take into account the purpose, audience, and content structure of the writing. Drafting is concerned with outlining ideas and thoughts. During this step, grammar is not emphasized. During the editing stage, the writer checks his own production for the correct language and content. In the last stage, the final version is produced by the writer. Checking grammar and spelling accuracies, punctuation, and word choices usually becomes the main task to be done at this stage.

A large number of teaching techniques have been proposed by various scholars (Colley, DeGani, & Stead, 2010; Colman 1991; Jang & Kim, 2004; Nunan 1987) to help EFL learners improve in the mentioned stages of writing. Competency-based approach (CBA) can be considered as one of the new proposed techniques to improve writing. This approach is a teaching approach concerned with language learning outcomes (Chang, 2007). This approach is mainly focused on the ultimate learning outputs rather than the process. The CBA has become a privileged topic in curriculum discourse as it claims that learners should mobilize their values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors in a personal and independent way to address

challenges successfully. Competencies are not just skills as opposed to knowledge but represent a complex articulation of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that learners can use whenever they are needed not just in examination. Competencies describe the ability to apply basic and other skills in situations that are commonly encountered in everyday life (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, based on this approach, at the first step, a clear set of learning outcomes are developed, and then some conditions, opportunities, instruments, and assessment methods are developed around the arena of the set goals that enable and encourage the learners to achieve those essential outcomes (Docking, 1994). Therefore, it seems to be interesting to work on the effect of this approach on an important aspect of language learning such as writing and a facilitator of learning such as motivation.

A review of the literature in this area can give some background information about the proposed concepts. Wong (2008), in a study on the pre-service teachers of Chinese in a Hong Kong tertiary institute, worked on the effect of competency-based teaching on the general English improvement of the participants. The results revealed that the participants in the competency-based group held a strong preference for learning English. Rainwater (2015) in his study carried out some interviews with faculty members and students at three colleges supporting new competency-based courses and programs to better understand faculty and student perspectives about the early phases of implementation. In the same vein, students embraced opportunities to improve their learning process while meeting career and life goals. In addition, Saadi, Rostami Abu Saeedi, and Karbalaei (2016) carried out experimental work on how the competency-based approach is conceptualized by teachers working in the Iranian context of language learning and how effective it has been with Iranian foreign language learners. Most of the respondents rated the items positively indicating that most of the objectives concerned with competency-based language teaching have been achieved to an acceptable level according to the participants' viewpoints. Vail (2018), in one of the recent works conducted in this area, tried to explore the effectiveness of a self-paced

study (in comparison with traditional fixed-paced learning) in a competency-based education program for Korean learners. The findings demonstrated that the participants who were underperforming their peers in the fixed-paced study improved and outperformed their peers after taking a self-paced program and could answer on average 20% more accurately on questions posed to them about the material and about themselves in English.

Moreover, there are some studies concerned with the effect of CBA on developing writing and the motivation of learners in different fields of study. Mostefaoui (2019) carried out a study on the effect of teaching writing through the CBA at secondary schools. The obtained findings revealed that students had difficulties in developing writing skills and CBA could help them overcome those challenges. In another research work in this area, Rosales (2019) examined the impact of network-supported CBA on the academic performance and motivation of distance learning courses. Participants in the study were students who recently had graduated from the university, majoring in architectural and service engineering. Learning Motivation Strategy Questionnaire (MSLQ) was used at the beginning and end of instruction to assess the importance of competency-based learning (CBL). The participants were divided into two groups, as CBA group and the control group. The results showed that students who used the CBA teaching strategy achieved higher academic performance than their counterparts in the traditional group. Students who participated in the course as part of the CBA showed the same intrinsic motivation throughout the course. The target level of external orientation of the students participating in the experimental group has undergone a level change. In a more recent work, van Griethuijsen, Kunstb, Woerkoma, and Wesselink, (2020) examined the impact of CBA on students' satisfaction (in terms of education quality, counseling, interpersonal communication, and the development of general professional skills). To this end, data on 662 teachers and their students from 46 faculty of Dutch high school vocational education were collected. According to the results, CBA had a positive impact on students' satisfaction with

the development of education quality, counseling, and interpersonal skills; however, no significant impact on students' satisfaction with the development of general professional skills has been found. These results showed that the implementation of CBA has to a certain extent fulfilled its promise to better prepare students for future work.

As was apparent in the mentioned studies, most of the studies conducted on the effectiveness of the competency-based approach were concerned with teachers' and students' viewpoints or general language achievement. Therefore, it seems that there is a great need to work on the effect of this approach on more precise components of a language skill during the process of learning. Moreover, most of the research studies conducted in this area were concerned with EFL learners and the effect of this treatment on potential language teachers of the educational system was mostly put into shadow. Thus, it is a good idea to have research on the effect of a competency-based approach on pre-service teachers who are getting to be prepared to lead a class.

Research Questions

Based on the research objectives and the gaps observed in the literature, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1. Is there a significant difference between pre-service teachers who receive instruction through the competency-based approach and the traditional product approach regarding their writing achievement at Farhangian University?

RQ2. Does the competency-based approach play a significant role in enhancing the motivation of pre-service student teachers at Farhangian University?

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Participants

This study was constructed based on an experimental design and sought to determine if the competency-based approach could influence the writing outcome of the pre-service teachers. In the present research work, the population included Iranian EFL pre-service teachers studying

at Farhangian University, Yazd. In order to have a homogeneous selection of the participants, an Oxford Quick Placement Test, as an indicator of the proficiency level, was administered to 100 candidates, and 80 of them were labeled as upper-intermediate pre-service teachers (scoring between 40 and 47 out of 60). The participants were divided into two groups: one experimental and one control group. The selected participants were aged from 18 to 21, both male and female. Moreover, the participants were surveyed regarding their linguistic backgrounds such as their L1, prior studies in English, and residence in English-speaking countries. The findings approved the homogeneity of the participants in these regards.

Instruments

In order to conduct the current study and come up with reliable results, four different kinds of tests were employed. First, an Oxford Quick Placement Test was used in order to identify the participants' proficiency level. Then, a pretest and a posttest were developed in order to assess the participant's performance on the writing skill. Moreover, a motivation questionnaire was used to gauge the motivation of the pre-service teachers participating in each group. Each instrument is described in detail in the following paragraphs.

First, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered to the candidates. The mentioned test contains sixty items about different structural aspects of English. This proficiency test is developed by Oxford University Press in corporation with Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate. Thirty minutes have been considered for attempting the items proposed in this test by the designers. The candidates scoring between 40 and 47 were labeled as upper-intermediate level and chosen as the research participants.

Moreover, a writing proficiency test was developed by the researchers and administered to all the participants as the pretest. The writing tasks were adapted from the general English textbooks of the university. The tasks were categorized into four sections. At each part, the students were provided with a topic (air pollution, favorite vacation, dream house, and future plan) and they were asked to write

a composition about it. The aim of the pretest was to test participants' writing before the treatment.

In the writing posttest, students were supposed to write compositions related to the topics used in the pretest. The aim of the writing posttest was to see if the students have made any improvement after the provision of the treatment. It is worth mentioning that the reliability of the writing tests was approved via inter-rater reliability (.89 for the pretest and .92 for the posttest) and their validity was approved through experts' opinion.

Finally, in order to measure the motivation of students regarding writing, from a 19-item Likert scale questionnaire designed by Farrah (2012), six items that were relevant to L2 learning/writing motivation were given to the participants of the present study at the end of the experiment. The relative agreement to the questionnaire items ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was calculated through Cronbach's alpha reliability formula (.74) and its validity was approved by three experts in the field of education and language learning.

Procedure

The current research work was mainly concerned with the pre-service teachers studying at Farhangian University. The researchers, first, explained all aspects of the treatment and answered the questions proposed by the pre-service teachers at the university. After ensuring that there were no ambiguities, the treatment was conducted. In order to control for the probable effects of proficiency level, an Oxford Quick Placement Test, as an indicator of proficiency level, was administered to the candidates. Since the major focus of this study was on upper-intermediate candidates, the ones scoring between 40 and 47 were chosen to participate in this research project. Then, the selected participants were divided into 2 groups (experimental and control).

Then the writing pretest was administered. The participants in both groups were supposed to write a paragraph composed of about one hundred words about each of the four topics

provided in the pretest. Then, the needs of the pre-service teachers participating in the competency-based group were identified through need analysis. Subsequently, the course teacher explained the tasks or competencies, the participants needed to accomplish. All the students were expected to learn the same writing strategies and discourse principles. The teacher created lessons and activities that helped the students accomplish the prescribed tasks. The tasks developed for improving the writing skill of the participants all mimicked real-world activities. For example, in one session the participants were taught to work on job application forms, and in other sessions, different sections of an article, a resume, and a biography were instructed. The treatment lasted for three months in twenty-four sessions. Finally, the students were evaluated on their ability to perform the designated task. However, the instructors working with the control group were supposed to teach the course according to the conventional methods used for improving the writing skill of the subjects. In the control group, the participants were taught the intended strategies and principles and they were asked to write some sentences containing the proposed principles. For example, in one session the participants were taught to work on job application forms, in other sessions different sections of an article, a resume, and a biography were instructed. However, the instructors working with the control group were supposed to teach the course according to the conventional methods

used for improving the writing skill of the subjects. In the control group, the participants were taught the intended strategies and principles and they were asked to write some sentences containing the proposed principles. As an example, they were asked to write five sentences containing cohesive markers.

At the end of the intervention, the participants, in both groups, were supposed to do the writing post-tests. Moreover, the motivation questionnaire was provided to the students participating in the experimental and control groups at the end of the term. The writing post-test also included four topics with the same level of difficulty. After that the papers were corrected by the instructors and researcher based on the writing scoring rubric proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981), and inter-rater reliability indexes were computed for the pretest and post-test of writing. The data obtained from the writing tests and the questionnaire were coded and made ready for statistical analysis.

RESULTS

The first research question in this study was concerned with the effect of a competency-based approach on the writing performance of pre-service student teachers. Therefore, the written texts collected from both groups in the pretest and posttest were compared. A one-way between-group analysis of covariance was conducted to come to the intended results. The descriptive findings are represented in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics on Writing Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Competency	41.1000	6.55262	20
Control	29.1500	4.60292	20
Total	35.1250	8.23746	40

The results obtained by conducting a one-way between-group analysis of covariance revealed that there was a difference between the posttest scores of control ($M = 29.150$, $SD = 4.602$) and experimental ($M = 41.100$, $SD = 6.552$) groups.

It seems that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the writing post-test. In order to discover the significance of the difference between the writing posttest scores of both groups, Table 2 is provided.

Table 2
Between-Group Comparison of Writing Posttest Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	1443.594	2	721.797	22.204	.000	.545
Intercept	698.004	1	698.004	21.472	.000	.367
Pretest	15.569	1	15.569	.479	.493	.013
Group	1404.834	1	1404.834	43.216	.000	.539
Error	1202.781	37	32.508			
Total	51997.000	40				
Corrected Total	2646.375	39				

According to the findings of Table 2, Sig is .000 which is less than 0.05, so there was a significant difference between the writing posttests of experimental and control groups. In other words, the experimental group outperformed the control group significantly on the writing post-tests.

The second research question, in this study, was concerned with the effect of competency-based approach on second language learning motivation of the participants. Table 3 deals with the descriptive results obtained in this regard.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics on Motivation Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Competency	20.20	1.908	20
Control	15.15	2.084	20
Total	17.675	3.229	40

The descriptive results revealed that there was a difference between the mean scores of the experimental ($M = 20.20$, $SD = 1.908$) and control group ($M = 15.15$, $SD = 2.084$).

However, the significance of the difference was approved through running a one-way ANCOVA. The results are represented in Table 4.

Table 4
Between-Group Comparison of Motivation Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	272.314	2	136.162	37.471	.000	.669
Intercept	287.792	1	287.792	79.199	.000	.682
Pretest	17.299	1	17.299	4.761	.036	.114
Group	243.790	1	243.790	67.090	.000	.645
Error	134.451	37	3.634			
Total	12903.000	40				
Corrected Total	406.775	39				

According to Table 4, regarding motivation, there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental ($M = 20.20$, $SD = 1.908$) and control group ($M = 15.15$, $SD = 2.084$), $F(2, 39) = 37.471$, $p < .000$ (two-tailed). Moreover, the magnitude of the difference in the means was very large ($\eta^2 = 0.645$).

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of a competency-based approach on enhancing writing and motivation among pre-service teachers. To achieve this aim, two research questions were set on the effect of receiving instruction through a competency-based approach and a traditional approach on the writing and motivation of the participants.

The first research question dealt with the difference between pre-service teachers who received instruction through a competency-based approach and a conventional product approach regarding their writing achievement at Farhangian University. The results revealed a significant difference between the writing post-test scores of the control and experimental groups. In other words, experimental group learners significantly outperformed the ones participating in the control group.

The second research question was concerned with the effect of a competency-based approach on the motivation of pre-service student teachers at Farhangian University. The results obtained by conducting an independent-sample *t-test* revealed that there was a significant difference between the motivation scores obtained by the control and competency-based group. In fact, the pre-service teachers working in the competency-based group outperformed the ones in the control group with respect to their motivation.

Better performance in writing and higher motivation of the students participating in the

competency-based approach might be due to the point that, in the competency-based group, students' needs and preferences were taken into account by the teachers, and the class exercises were guided by the teachers according to the improvement pace of the students. As a result, the students were more motivated to work on different aspects of language including writing.

The above-mentioned results can lead to the conclusion that using a competency-based approach can improve EFL students' writing ability. In general, the obtained results asserted that this approach is really helpful and effective in improving writing skill. Moreover, the obtained results were in line with the ones obtained by Rainwater (2015), Saadi, et al., (2016), and Vail (2018). However, the reviewed studies were mostly concerned with the effect of a competency-based approach on the general language competence of EFL learners. The present study was specifically concerned with the writing skill of EFL learners. Therefore, this study is somehow innovative among the studies conducted in this case. Moreover, in the previous studies done in this area, the effect of a competency-based approach on the motivation of the participants was not measured. The present study revealed the positive effect of this approach on the motivation of the EFL learners participating in the experimental group.

It could be concluded that teachers should do a needs analysis before the commencement of the course and give more instructional emphasis to those skills and areas in which students need a lot but they do not feel confident in. Moreover, to enhance the effectiveness of competency-based language teaching, the language program must be locally developed so that curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be correlated with each other.

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