

A Comparative Study of Strategy Instrument through Process vs. Product Writing on IELTS Writing Performance of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study attempted to investigate the writing performance of EFL learners through process vs. product writing on IELTS test. To do this, the researcher randomly selected 60 candidates who wanted to take the IELTS Test. They had already taken and passed several technical courses regarding the skills in that test. After they were divided into two experimental groups, they were given a writing pre-test. Then, each of the process and product strategies were practiced with the experimental groups. The feedback that was given for the process strategy focused on the steps of writings related to that specific task with little focus on grammatical and spelling mistakes. On the other hand, there were strict corrections on grammatical and spelling mistakes of the writing tasks in product strategy. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the process and product groups. Also, there was a significant difference between the process and product strategy which indicated that process strategy was more effective than the product strategy.

Keywords: Assessment, EFL, IELTS Test, process approach, product approach, writing

Introduction

Nowadays, English seems to be playing a main role all around the world for people in communicating with each other, and the purpose of teaching the language has moved from the mastery of structure to the ability to utilize the language for communicative purposes. However; it is exceptional to find people who tend to avoid entering L2 communication situations even if they have a high level of communicative competence (Strevens, 1992). This implies that there is a further layer of mediating factors between having the competence to communicate and putting this competence into practice.

Among the four language skills, the ability to write has become an important skill in our literate world since everything needs to be conveyed by writing. Then, there are plenty of aspects for carrying out any sort of writing, which is dependent on the context. The dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to writing, in the 1970's, led to the improvement of the process approach. Recently researchers have stressed the need for ESL writing instruction to move to a process approach. They believe that it would teach students not only how to edit but also to develop strategies to generate ideas, compose multiple drafts, deal with feedback, and revise their written work on all levels (Chenowith, 1987).

In the present study the researcher's concern was about English as a foreign language. For acquiring this language, students attend English classes or academic courses, and since writing in English has a great role in communication, it is important to acquire how to communicate effectively in writing. The use of the target language is one of the main purposes of second language learning and it is an indicator of success in learning the second language. Mostly teachers, by their corrective role and through their use of questioning and directing normally the context of learning, cause many classroom learning situations leave little room for learners to initiate. So, teachers' corrective error feedback and lack of writing contexts that invite learners to be active rather than passive participants in the process of learning, especially learning writing, is another

deficiency that should be encountered and modified. Based on the aims of the study, the following research questions and hypotheses were proposed:

Q1. Does process writing strategy have significant effect on writings of EFL learners?

Q2. Does product writing strategy have significant effect on writings of EFL learners?

Q3. Is process writing strategy more effective than the product writing strategy?

H₀1. Process writing strategy does not have any significant effect on writings of EFL learners.

H₀2. Product writing strategy does not have any significant effect on writings of EFL learners.

H₀3. Process writing strategy is not more effective than the product writing strategy.

Literature Review

Writing is defined as the productive skill in the written mode (Heaton, 1988). It seems that most of us have some difficulty in getting our thoughts down on paper since writing is a complex task; also the difficulty increases if English is not the first language of the writer (Widdowson, 1983). Mastery of writing skill is the same as having power that let you have control “not only of information but of people” (Tribble, 1996, p.13). So, writing is a sophisticated cognitive task; it is an activity that requires “thought, discipline, and concentration.” (White, 1987, p.266). Academic writing is not about knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and mechanism (Weigle, 2002; Tribble, 1996; Hyland, 2003). Knapp and Watkins (as cited in Hyland, 2003) argue that “grammar is a name for the source available to user of a language system for producing text” (p.8). According to their claim, grammar is only one resource in the activity of producing a text. But we can see that experienced writers improve all their language knowledge in producing a well formed text, and grammar is only one source to raise this conscious manipulation; particularly in the drafting and revision stage, where the writer mind focuses only to correct errors to get the content right.

According to Tribble (1996), it can then be said that although writing as a major skill in teaching and learning any language is easy, at the same time it is not an easy thing to do.

Particularly at the present time when students don't have long attention spans and are more and more "digital" and visual learners. However, it is a necessary skill that presents any student a world of possibilities. Writing allows controlled, deliberate and powerful communication. So we have to get learners' writing better and better. According to Brown (2004), the most important genres of writing are as follows: academic, job-related and personal writing. Papers and general subject reports, essays, compositions, academically focused journals, short-answer test responses are among the academic writing genre. The job-related genre includes messages (e.g., phone messages), reports (e.g., job evaluations, project reports), advertisements, manuals, but letters, emails, greeting cards, invitations, messages, notes, calendar entries, shopping lists, reminders and the likes are related to personal genre of writing.

Compared with the other basic skills such as listening, speaking and reading, writing can be considered as the most difficult skill for language learners. Writing requires writers to have a good deal of second language background knowledge such as lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization in order to produce a good writing (Raimes, 1983). A variety of writing methods are available to encourage learners to write that a brief review on each particular type of writing approach is provided as follow:

The controlled- to-free approach, the text-based approach, and the guided composition are the different names which have been used to call product-based writing approaches. Mostly, in product-based approaches grammatical and syntactical forms in L2 writing are tried to reinforce. There are numerous activities in product-based writing in order to raise students' awareness in second language writing from the lower level of language proficiency to advance level such as the use of model paragraphs, sentence-combining, and rhetorical pattern exercises (Raimes, 1983; Silva, 1990). In the product-based approaches, writing is considered as a simple linear model of the writing process which proceeds systematically from prewriting to composing and to correcting (Tribble, 1996). Also, in text-based approaches instructors and learners believe that planning stage of writing begins and finishes in the primary period of composition. However, Hairston (1982) and Raimes (1983) found that product-based writing can never be described as linear or as orderly as is generally believed. In contrast to what is recommended in various textbooks, writers do not

pursue an orderly sequence of planning, organizing, writing and then revising. When a writer's product is provided in lines, the process that produces it is no way linear rather recursive (Raimes, 1983).

Process-based approaches can be defined as a mechanism whereby teachers encourage learners to see writing as the discovery of meaning and ideas, not as grammar exercises (O'Brien, 2004). Process-based writing is an approach that is viewed as the way writers actually work on their writing tasks from the first stage to the last of the written product. During the writing process, teachers can enable learners to explore their thoughts and develop their own writing by using the five-step writing process model of Herwins, that is prewriting, first draft composing, feedback, second draft writing, proofreading.

As it is asserted by Flower and Hayes (1980), writing processes may be viewed as the writer's set of tools. In using these tools, professional writers or even students are not constrained to use them in a fixed order or in stages. They do not need to follow a fixed order because they have to move back and forth between different writing stages to be able to produce better ideas (Scott, 1996).

Thus, writing in the process approach can be considered as a dynamic and unpredictable process since writers try to reformulate their ideas and approximate the meaning of what they want to express in their work (Tribble, 1996). Instructors use process-based approaches a lot in teaching L2 writing since they have lots of benefits.

When comparing process-based writing with other writing approaches it can be seen that learners are able to learn how to compose writing in L2 with little or no background knowledge. Instructors guide them through the whole process of their writing tasks so they can develop their writing step by step. They give them feedback, sufficient time and opportunity of peer and teacher review to develop a sense of audience, which allows them not only to think about their previous writing but also to consider the possible existence of other point of views (Boughey, 1997).

Genre-based approach is defined as the way to language and literacy education that merges an understanding of genre and genre teaching in the writing class (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005).

According to Badger and White (2000), since learners have a chance to learn a wide variety of writing patterns, for example, the business letter, the academic report, and the research paper, writing in the genre-based approach is considered as an extension of the product-oriented approach.

Learning particular genre construction can be viewed as a way to help learners come up with appropriate actual writing in their real life outside the classroom. It also increases learners' awareness of such writing conventions as organization, arrangement, form, and genre. Through the composing process, genre-based writing reflects a particular purpose of a social situation and allows students to acquire writing skills consciously by imitation and analysis of each writing genre (Badger & White, 2000).

According to Byram (2004), despite the beneficial roles of genre-based approach in helping learners to produce written work with confidence, there are two concerns about it. One concern is that it underestimates the skills required to produce content, and the other is that it disregards learners' self-sufficiency. The genre-based approach not only places too much emphasis on conventions and genre features but also is less helpful for students in discovering the texts' true messages due to the targeted aspects of the specified genre. As well, if teachers spend class time explaining how language is used for a range of purposes and with a variety of readers, learners are likely to be largely passive.

Thus, the genre approach is blamed for limiting learners' creative thoughts about content and is criticized in that it overlooks natural processes of learning and learners' creativity (Badger & White, 2000). Finally, Bawarshi (2000) pointed out that, at its best, it helps learners to identify and interpret literary texts, while at its worst; it interferes with the learners' creativity. This concern means that students may end up writing genres as meaningless reproductions.

However, genres always evolve through incorporating a rich variety of voices, styles, discourse features, and points of view. The genre approach allows students to be exposed to the plurality of a genre, which implies that students still have chances to develop their creativity in the genre approach. Thus, if the genre approach is to remain true to the fundamental nature of genres, then

teaching in the genre approach should include a final step in which students are encouraged to break the style of the existing genre and let it evolve (Bakhtin, 1986).

Due to the weaknesses of the genre approach noted above, Badger and White (2000) tried to experiment an alternative model, using genre and process approaches together, called the process-genre approach. Through this research, they confirmed that if the writing cycle begins with models, description of the key linguistic features, discussion of the social situation in which it happens, and analysis of the recommended rhetorical patterns of each genre this, dual approach works well. Student writing is then subjected to the sequence of drafts in the process approach.

However, in spite of numerous studies done in this field, there is no study performed to investigate strategy instrument (Process vs. Product Writing) on IELTS writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

Method

Participants

The researcher randomly selected sixty candidates who wanted to take the IELTS Test. They had already taken and passed several technical courses regarding the skills in that test. They were divided into two experimental groups. The age of the participants ranged from almost 18 to 40. The candidates who took this test had at least upper intermediate level of proficiency and this was considered as a homogeneous group.

Instrument

The only instrument that was used in this study is the writing tasks for the academic IELTS test. The Writing Task 2 of the IELTS test required candidates to write at least 250 words. They were presented with a topic and were tested on their ability to respond by giving and justifying an opinion, discussing the topic, summarizing details, outlining problems, identifying possible solutions and supporting what they write with reasons, arguments and relevant examples from their own knowledge or experience.

Procedures

After dividing the candidates (N=60) into two groups, they were given a writing pretest. Then, each of the process and product strategies were practiced with the experimental groups. At the end of each session, they were asked to write a writing task based on the approach that they were taught (It was the same as the task 2 in IELTS). Afterwards, their writings were checked by their professor the next session. Scoring of the candidates' writings was in line with the same methods that the examiners checked the tasks. The only difference was that the feedback that was given for the process strategy focused on the steps of writings related to that specific task with little focus on grammatical and spelling mistakes. On the other hand, there were strict corrections on grammatical and spelling mistakes of the writing tasks in product strategy. It is worth mentioning that each of the tasks was scored out of 9.

Results

The researcher conducted a series of calculations and statistical analyses in order to test the raised hypotheses in this study, and they are as follows:

Testing research hypothesis 1: In this phase of the study, the paired samples statistics of the pretest and posttest in process group is depicted.

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics of the Pretest and Posttest (Process Group)

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	6.06	30	1.09	.20
	posttest	7.48	30	.94	.17

As Table 1 shows, the mean of the posttest scores in the process group is higher than the pretest. Furthermore, a paired samples correlation was run, too.

Table 2. *Paired Samples Correlations of the Pretest and Posttest (Process Group)*

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	30	.46	.01

Table 2 presents the correlation of the pretest and posttest in process group and shows a high correlation. The significance of the difference between the two tests was tested though Paired Samples t-test (Table 3).

Table 3. *Paired Samples Test of the Process Group*

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	-1.41	1.06	.19	-1.81	-1.01	-7.26	29	.00

Table 3 above provides information about the effectiveness of process strategy writing on EFL learners' writing performance. By looking at the figures, it is observed that the significance

is 0.00, that is lower than 0.05 ($P=0.00 < 0/05$). As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected, hence the process strategy was effective and the effect was statistically important.

Testing research hypothesis 2: In this section, the effectiveness of the product strategy was investigated, and the descriptive statistics are as follows:

Table 4. *Paired Samples Statistics of the Pretest and Posttest (Product Group)*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	6.00	30	.80	.14
	Posttest	6.80	30	.83	.15

As in the process group, the mean of the posttest in product group was higher than the pretest. Moreover, the correlation of the pretest and posttest was calculated.

Table 5. *Paired Samples Correlations*

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	30	.78	.00

Table 5 illustrates that the correlation was found to be .45, and the p-value equaled .01 which is less than 0.05. The significance of the difference was tested though Paired Samples t-test (Table 6)

Table 6. Paired Samples Test of the Product Group

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	-.80	.53	.09	-.99	-.60	-8.19	29	.00

According to table 6, the test probability (sig) is 0.00, that is lower than 0.05 ($P= 0.00 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. So, the product strategy was effective and the effect was statistically important.

Testing research hypothesis 3: There was another phase in this research which compared the effectiveness of the two strategies mentioned earlier. As it was previously pointed, due to the scores' normality the parametric statistic method of T-test was used and since at this stage, the scores of two individual groups were about to be compared, independent sample t-test was used. Table 7 below shows the results in detail:

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Process and Product Strategies

Groups		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Strategy	process	30	7.48	.94	.17
	product	30	6.80	.83	.15

Table 7 illustrates descriptive statistics of the two groups. By comparing the mean score of the two groups, it is observed that the score difference between the two groups is 0.6, and it is thus assumed that the treatment in experimental group was more effective. However to what extend this difference is statistically significant is shown and discussed in the following table.

Table 8. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Strategy	Equal variances assumed	.86	.35	2.97	58	.00	.68	.23	.22	1.14
	Equal variances not assumed			2.97	57.20	.00	.68	.23	.22	1.14

	assume									
	d									

According to table 8, the test probability (sig) is 0.00, that is lower than 0.05 ($P = 0.00 < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected which indicates the two strategies have had statistically significant differential effect on EFL learners' writing performance. Process strategy was more effective than the product strategy.

Discussion

As the results revealed, participants in the process group outperformed the ones in the product group. The wide gap between the two strategies is concerned with the perspectives related to their methodology. Even though writing requires sustained practice and effort, it looks that taking a process-oriented strategy is more beneficial and influential for EFL learners since they are engaged with some recursive stages which demand planning, drafting, revising, editing, and peer working.

Moreover, product strategy is dependent on a cognitive and problem-solving perspective, while process strategy depends on the work of Vygotsky who considers the social context as the core of communication and learning process. Lantolf (2000) who is a sociocultural theorist ignores the individual cognition towards distribution of mental activities to the extent that he claims that the mind rarely works alone and writing lends itself to the construction of texts by students working together.

The results of this study is also in line with Saeidi and Sahebkhair (2011) and Sutikno (2008) in that processed-based approach is more effective than the product-based one due to the fact that it gives the students the chance to develop and explore a personal approach to writing. However, the important disadvantage of product-based strategy is that model patterns impedes L2 learners' creativity and pushes the learners to make use of the same pattern in various contexts regardless of context and content of situation, and as a result discouraging the writers rather than strengthening them.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study that were discussed in the previous section, we can claim that writing as the most difficult productive skill requires gradual and deep learning for the EFL learners. In Iran, university students and the participants of this study do not have the opportunity to receive direct instruction before entering the university in writing. Moreover, teaching a few courses in writing traditionally at universities cannot increase students' abilities to the level of high proficiency. Writing needs totally being immersed in real practice, i.e. engaging with various types of communication. However, almost all the practices made in writing courses are very vague, artificial, and mechanical that they don't seem appealing for students to follow those practices in a kind of a problem-solving way (Ferris, 2010).

As the final point, it is recommended that writing be taught as a process rather than as a product; however, the product strategy is used more often. This is because of lack of knowledge among teachers regarding the importance of a process strategy, and also lack of belief in its practicality. By its nature, process writing is really time-consuming and teachers' resistance likely increases when they face crowded classes (Dovey, 2010). By putting all this together, shared planning, collaborative problem-solving tasks, peer feedback, brainstorming, multiple drafts, and revision have been recommended as related activities in the cycle of process writing. Moreover, the findings of this study can be useful if we want to help teachers develop and improve their writing skill and they can help them to lessen their shortcomings, and teachers can also be assisted to recognize the effect of these two strategies in their classes.

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