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Saudi EFL teachers' perspective on effective writing instruction to intermediate school students: an exploratory study

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Abstract

The study aims at investigating the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives towards the effective writing instruction as well as identifying and determining the impact of their writing strategies on the overall improvement of the intermediate level students writing skills. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to a sample of (304) male English language teachers who were randomly selected in Riyadh educational directorate for conducting this research. The data collected and analyzed has resulted into the following findings:

1. Many components such as writing goals settings, its processes and the role of technology should be considered in effective writing classes.
2. EFL teachers continually need to reflect on their teaching strategies as well as on the classroom activities.

Keywords: EFL teachers, intermediate student, KSA, effective writing

1. Introduction

The current study aimed at identifying and determining the impact of writing strategies used by Saudi EFL teachers on the overall improvement of the intermediate level students writing skills. It also endeavours to study the perspectives of the Saudi EFL teachers towards the effective writing instruction. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to describe and analyse the influence of the actual writing strategies used in EFL classrooms according to the teachers' viewpoints. Therefore, a sample of (304) male English language teachers was randomly selected in Riyadh educational directorate for the purpose of conducting this study. A questionnaire was also designed and distributed as a main data collection tool. To check the validity and the reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher has verified them by an appropriate statistical tool. And the study showed that the most common writing strategies used in the Saudi intermediate EFL classrooms today are text models, using skills structures for vocabulary building strategy, rearranging jumbled sentences, mind maps, and brainstorming. Additionally, EFL teachers also believe that effective writing instruction depends on the process approach that involves the processes of planning, drafting, reviewing, editing, and publishing. They also referred to the vital usage of technology in writing, in addition to the positive impact of using pair work as well as group work while writing activities. Furthermore, they also suggested the use of individualized writing assistance, the use of instructional lessons, and the adoption of pre-planned writing in writing classes. Due to the above findings mentioned, the researcher then recommends the application of writing strategies that fit the students' needs in EFL writing classes.

2. Literature review

Writing is one of the four language skills that is an inseparable part of any language curriculum. As stated by Reid, (2002:157). "Writing is a very important skill for most students of English throughout the world". Therefore, it is extremely important for EFL teachers to try multiple teaching strategies that may consistent with improving of the students' overall writing skills so as to attain full understanding of the writing process as well as developing various writing skills while classes. On the other hand, Jodi Reiss, (2011) ^[12] states that today's EFL writing instruction is mainly teacher-centered which provides no

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opportunity for actual writing practice while classes. Additionally, Aly (2002) ^[4] investigates a pattern of writing in which students are given a topic to write about, study vocabulary and grammar, before writing random ideas. Students' writing samples are then corrected by the teachers based on sentence structure and grammar. Such a limited focus on practice of writing has resulted into poor thinking from the students' part while extensive focus on detail and form is addressed in classes as stated by Boreen (2005) ^[6]. Therefore, teachers have to avoid increasing of the teacher talking time instead they have to provide much time for practice. It is also found that some writing approaches have concentrated on writing in its final form and not on the processes that students follow to write any paper (Aly, 2002) ^[4]. Manning, (2006), on the other hand, studied the weakness of the product-centered orientation in teaching writing addressing the fact that it did not allow student to plan, organize, draft, and share their writings with their teachers and peers as well. Therefore, students produce. According to Chen (2010) ^[9], this situation has resulted into poor written texts and miss the holistic view of what sound writing entails.

The literature review also shows that the complexity of writing is attributed to the multiple stages that writing undergoes in terms of prewriting, writing and editing in order to reach the final product. According to Trembley (1993) ^[15], writing is a difficult and risky skill, simply because it comprises different aspects such as punctuation, spelling, organization, etc. Writing also establishes the communication channel between writers and readers and, additionally, it is needed in conveying messages, transferring knowledge, taking exams, and learning as found by (Archibald, 2004) ^[5]. However, in study conducted by (Celce- Murcia, 2001) ^[8] the researcher realized that proficiency in native language writing does not necessarily mean proficiency in the target language. Thus, it is unsurprising to say that a great number of native speakers encounter a difficulty in the mastery of the writing skill. It seems as if the teacher-centered approach in EFL writing classes, has resulted in the inactiveness of the learners. For example, EFL students at the high school are in most cases not taught how to deal with writing as a process (Weigle, 2002; Cheng, 2002) ^[10]. Therefore, they go to colleges with very limited writing abilities. According to Zhao & Dong (2011: 114), "most EFL students reach university level without experience at composing in English; rather they have done written translation of sentence and paragraphs".

To sum up this section, we can say that teachers need to vary their teaching strategies to encourage students to do their best and to generate acceptable writing products via conducting regular writing workshops. Graves (1993) ^[11] states that teaching of writing can be divided into five categories: brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Therefore, writing workshop is an interactive experience that takes place when students write collaboratively and interact with the teacher as well as their peers to organize ideas, plan for writing, revise, edit, and share their writing. Writing workshops also promote students' communicative competence where students interpret, express, and negotiate meaning to develop communicative competence as stated by (Cheng, 2002) ^[10]. In this study, the researcher is attempting to investigate how learning writing is also challenging to many students and how teaching approaches are directly influencing the

learning of writing in general. Moreover, it tries to reflect on the EFL teachers' perspective in effective writing strategies and its applicability in writing classes. It also attempts to identify the impact of the effective writing instruction as perceived by Saudi EFL teachers on the overall improvement of the students' writing skills.

3. Statement of the study problem

The current practice of teaching writing to EFL in Saudi Arabia suggests that students encounter difficulties on how to organize their ideas, sharing them and making drafts. The literature review shows that EFL teachers play a key role in making writing classes effective via using different teaching strategies that enable students to overcome their writing problems. However, the employment of such strategies is always problematic when it comes to traditional teaching methods which are common in KSA today, particularly in public schools. It also seems as if students have limited time allocated for practical in class writing simply because the teacher talking time is always dominating such traditional teacher – centred method, meanwhile students remain passive listeners. Effective writing instruction depends on the teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards writing instruction as well as on the writing strategies that they use in class. Accordingly, communicative teaching approach is suggested to provide students with more practical writing sessions compared to the traditional teaching methods. Thus, suggesting more practical approaches may put an end to the poor writing skills that seems the most challenging subject among the Saudi EFL intermediate level students. It is not only affecting L2 learning of writing, but also the overall product of L2 writing process. The current study is addressing these challenges and attempting to overcome them.

4. Study questions

1. What are the writing strategies used by Saudi EFL teachers in the intermediate stage?
2. How do Saudi EFL teachers conduct effective writing instructions in EFL classes?
3. What are Saudi EFL teachers' suggestions for effective writing instruction?

5. Study Hypotheses

1. Traditional teaching methods such as grammar – translation is effectively used in writing classes today.
2. Conducting effective writing instructions is challenging at the intermediate stage.
3. Effective EFL teachers' suggestions for improving the writing instruction and skills are required at the intermediate stage.

6. Material and methods

In this study the researcher uses both the quantitative and qualitative methods to describe and analyse the influence of the effective writing instruction on the overall improvement of the intermediate level students writing skills from teachers' perspective. This research comprised a sample of (304) male English language teachers enrolled at the Saudi intermediate stage in Riyadh educational directorate. The study subjects are the teachers enrolled during the academic year 2015-2016 who are randomly selected. They were selected on the basis of their teaching experience, all the participants have more than two years of experience in teaching English which is beneficial for the purpose of

conducting this study. In order to achieve the suggested goals of the study, the researcher used a questionnaire as the main data collection tool. The questionnaire was designed to address challenges faced by the Saudi EFL teachers in conducting effective writing instruction as stated ahead. The questionnaire is composed of (50) statements based on the relevant literature reviewed. In total, (320) questionnaires have been distributed to the study subjects while (304) of them have collected back. The rating scale used in this questionnaire is Likert scale that consist of five ratings "strongly disagree", "disagree", "not sure", "agree", and "strongly agree". After collecting the data via the questionnaire, the frequencies and the percentages of the participants' responses were recorded for each item of the questionnaire. Additionally, the means and standard deviation for each statement were also extracted. And the data were then tabulated and represented in figures in order to visually signify the responses in a clearer way. The findings were discussed and analyzed in the light of the literature review. Finally, the researcher presented recommendations and suggestions based on the research findings.

The procedures for conducting the study were as follows:

1. Participants were made aware of the survey purpose, they were also given the full contacts of the researcher in case of any inquiries and their approval was ensured.
2. The researcher distributed the questionnaires on the participants and collected their responses during the workplace hours.
3. The questionnaire data collection process took seven days.
4. Finally, the data were collected and transcribed for the analysis process.

7. Questionnaire Validity and Reliability

Concerning validity, we can say that it refers to the degree to which a study accurately reflects or assesses the specific concept that the researcher is attempting to measure (Robson, 1993). The researcher achieved the face validity of the questionnaire by submitting it to a number of experts requesting their opinions on the suitability for the study objectives. More than half of the experts conveyed that the questionnaire is suitable for what it is designed to measure. Additionally, the researcher verified the construct validity of the questionnaire by using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The results are show in the below table.

Table 1

Part 3		Part 2		Part 1	
Pearson	S	Pearson	S	Pearson	S
.455**	1	.617**	1	.182**	1
.613**	2	.588**	2	.632**	2
.647**	3	.678**	3	.331**	3
.632**	4	.639**	4	.629**	4
.660**	5	.597**	5	.607**	5
.423**	6	.729**	6	.522**	6
.598**	7	.623**	7	.639**	7
.618**	8	.704**	8	.569**	8
.657**	9	.614**	9	.527**	9
.663**	10	.649**	10	.548**	10
.690**	11	.633**	11	.396**	11
.535**	12	-	-	.312**	12
.501**	13	-	-	.253**	13

Pearson Correlation Coefficient

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As shown in the above table, the values are significant at the level of 0.01 or 0.05, which indicates that all the questionnaire items are valid for the study. In terms of reliability, we can say that it refers to the extent to which an experiment, test, or any measuring procedure yields the same result on repeated trials. In this study, the researcher has used Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to assess the reliability. Accordingly, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the questionnaire was 0.750. This coefficient is acceptable as the questionnaire is used for the first time. The questionnaire is then considered as a reliable tool and its results are shown in table 2.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha for Questionnaire Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	N	Sections
0.684	25	Writing Strategies
0.802	11	Effective Writing Instruction
0.849	14	Teachers' Suggestions for Effective Writing Instruction
0.772	50	Total

Table (2) demonstrates that the values of the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire's sections using (Cronbach's Alpha) ranged between (0.849) and (0.684) which is a good factor for conforming high reliability coefficients. Moreover, the overall reliability coefficient for the research instrument (i.e. for all the items of the questionnaire: 50 items) is (0.772), and these figures indicate a high reliability coefficient. The high levels of research instrument's reliability and its suitability is then confirmed and used for the application processes in this study.

Concerning the objectives of the study and its analyses, a number of appropriate statistical methods have been used, to name some; we can say that the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software is used in addition to the following:

1. **Pearson Correlation:** its purpose is to determine research instrument's validity and the internal consistency of the scores of the items.
2. **Cronbach's Alpha:** aims to ensure the reliability of the research instrument, of the questionnaire.
3. **Percentage & Frequency:** aims at identifying the characteristics of the research sample and to categorize the responses of the participants.
4. **Arithmetic Mean:** its purpose is to arrange the items according to the degree of importance which based on the study results.
5. **Standard Deviation:** aims to demonstrate how much dispersion from the average exists in the respondents' responses.

8. Findings

In terms of the study findings, it is found that the Saudi EFL teachers enrolled at the intermediate stage believe that effective writing instruction depends on many components such as setting goals for writing, using the writing processes (plan, draft, edit, review, and publish), and using technology. Effective writing instruction is important for EFL writing teachers themselves and that is why teachers continually need to reflect on their teaching strategies and activities. Therefore, it is extremely important for them to

monitor and evaluate their own teaching and ensure that their objectives and expectations are met.

9. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The choices of writing strategies should always focus on students' needs.
2. Equal emphasis to writing is required similar to other language skills while classes.
3. Application of technology, using computers and social networks (Twitter & Facebook, etc....) is extremely important.
4. The Ministry of Education or the interested parties need to train EFL teachers, especially in the implementation of the process approach towards the teaching of writing

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