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Chief Editors

Dr. Paul Robertson

Dr. Rajabali Askarzadeh Torghabeh

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Foreword

Welcome to the fourth edition of the year 2010. The Iranian EFL Journal has had strong growth over the last few years with a monthly readership now exceeding 1,800 readers. For a new journal examining the topic of English second language acquisition from a local perspective, the growth and readership has been pleasing. Statistically, readers are coming from almost 80 countries. In the fourth issue of volume 6 we present 5 articles for your reading. In the first article, the authors Rajabali Askarzadeh Torghabeh, Mohamad Reza Hashemi and Hesamoddin Shahriari Ahmadi have argued that by integrating literature into the writing syllabus, teachers can avoid both extremes and, at the same time, increase the motivation to write among learners. In the second article, Fatemeh Mahbod Karamouzian has analyzed the content of a reading comprehension series entitled *Reading through Interaction* used at the university level in Iran. In the next article, Hamide Ghaemi and Hamed Ghaemi have investigated the impact of item format on the reading comprehension ability of dyslexic children. In the fourth article, Zahra Amirian and Mansoor Tavakoli have analyzed the Introduction sections of applied linguistic research articles across English and Persian languages and compared them with the Introduction sections of English RAs written by Persian EFL writers. In the last article Seyyed Mohammad Ali Soozandehfar and Marzieh Souzandehfar have made a comparison between integratively motivated students of English at Shiraz University and their instrumentally motivated peers in terms of their speaking achievement.

We hope you enjoy this edition and look forward to your readership.



Title

Writing through literature: A Novel Approach to EFL Writing Instruction

Authors

Rajabali Askarzadeh Torghabeh (Ph. D)

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Mohamad Reza Hashemi (Ph. D)

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Hesamoddin Shahriari Ahmadi (Ph. D Candidate)

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Bio Data

Rajabali Askarzadeh Torghabeh, assistant professor in English language and literature. Department of English, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. His main research interests are: English language learning/teaching, English and American literature.

Mohammad Reza Hashemi, assistant professor in Applied Linguistics, Department of English, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. He is currently teaching translation studies. His areas of interest include translation studies, discourse analysis and CDA.

Hesamoddin Shahriari Ahmadi, Ph.D candidate in TEFL at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. He is currently teaching English courses at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. His areas of interest include EFL/ESL teaching.

Abstract

Instructors teaching writing in the EFL setting either choose to introduce the language necessary for writing (grammar, vocabulary, language use) or focus on the process of writing and attend to matters such as content and organization. In the former case, it seems that it is not really writing that is being taught, and in the latter, students are, in a sense, being hastily pushed into the deep end of the pool. The present study argues that by integrating literature into the writing syllabus, teachers can avoid both extremes and, at the same time, increase the motivation to write among learners. With this in mind, a number of 60 EFL learners were divided into two groups. In the experimental group, learners completed a task which included the reading and summarization of a short story, and in the control group, learners were simply asked to write a narrative on a proposed topic. The results reveal that tasks employing literature as content serve to improve the overall quality as well as the content, organization and language use of learners' writing.

Key Words: EFL writing instruction, literature, content, formal features of writing.

Introduction

By reviewing various EFL writing curricula, one can vividly see that each has its focus on a separate aspect of the writing process. Some attempt to teach language structures, while others deal with creative expression. Some textbooks start by teaching genre and context; others give

priority to content and the process of composition. Even in comprehensive textbooks which cover almost all the mentioned areas, the order in which they appear is open to much debate. What is more, despite attempts by some teachers and syllabi to adopt an eclectic approach, it is not uncommon for one particular aspect to outweigh all others (Cummings, 2003). This has resulted in a great amount of confusion among writing instructors over the 'what' and 'how' of teaching writing in the EFL setting.

The present study seeks to argue that literature can be used as a unifying element, bringing both order and coherence to the process of writing instruction. That is, literature can serve as a theme for the EFL writing course, and could possibly motivate learners to write with independence. Literature could also be used as an instrument to resolve the 'focus on form vs. content' debate in the feedback provided by instructors. Finally, the use of literature in designing tasks could support claims that recommend extensive reading, and assert that practice in writing alone cannot lead to the successful acquisition of second language writing skills (Krashen, 1993). In fact, this study concurs with and seeks to corroborate the view that focused reading can supply a tremendous amount of tacit knowledge of the features of written discourse, including grammar, vocabulary, organizational patterns, interactional devices and the like.

To examine the potentials of using literary texts in the composition classroom, an experiment was designed in which a comparison was made between a group of learners who relied on a short story to write a narrative, and another group who were only given a topic based upon which they had to base their narratives. The raters based their judgments on a series of criteria such as content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics of writing. It was hypothesized that being given the opportunity to fall back on a text, learners in the first group would have the advantage of brushing up the language of their writing, as well as doing away with the burden and complexity of coming up with content for their compositions. In fact, a possible explanation for why teachers have trouble integrating creative writing tasks into the EFL classroom is the difficulties learners face in providing content for their writing. Countless times, teachers have reported encountering disheartened students who complain about not knowing what to write about, and the present study argues that using literary texts can function as crutches to support beginning writers and give them the confidence they need.

Review of Literature

Becoming familiar with the target language culture is sometimes believed to be part of second language acquisition (Brown, 2000). Based on this belief, some approaches and methods to language teaching have focused, at least in part, on bringing aspects of the target language culture to the learners' attention. This aim is achieved in a variety of ways, including the direct provision of lists and accounts of culture, the use of role-playing techniques, readings, films, simulation games, etc.

One way of teaching culture and language concomitantly is through the use of literature. This technique dates back to the days of the Grammar Translation Method. In classrooms in which this method was implemented, students were required to translate literary texts from the second language to their native language. Following the heyday of the Grammar Translation Method and the transition to more positivistic and empirical approaches to language teaching, little, if any, attention was paid to the use of literature in the classroom. No trace of literary texts could be found in methods such as the Audiolingual or Direct Methods. Neither was literature included in the dominant methods of the 70s, such as Suggestopedia, the Natural Approach, the Silent Way or Total Physical Response.

These days, the achievement of communicative competence has become central in the EFL/ESL communities. According to Sawidou (2004), communicative competence involves more than the mere acquisition of structure and form. To be communicatively competent, learners must also be able to interpret language in all its possible social and cultural contexts. Therefore, the use of literature can be resurrected as a powerful pedagogic tool for achieving this aim.

Various advantages have been proposed for the use of literary texts in the language teaching process. First of all, one can refer to the authenticity possessed by such texts. Since literature is rarely produced for pedagogical purposes, it can serve as a means for introducing different linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings to learners who at least have an intermediate proficiency of the target language. To attain first-hand experience of how language is used in daily communication, learners are sometimes encouraged to visit or reside in the country in which the language is spoken. However, this is often not practical for many language learners. For these learners, literature can act as a substitute and can provide a glimpse at how authentic, daily communication takes place in the target language community.

As previously mentioned, literature can also be used to foster cross-cultural awareness in the learners. Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1989) have introduced four aspects of culture. These include the aesthetic, sociological, semantic and pragmatic sense. The aesthetic sense relates to the artistic aspect of language extant in literature, film and the arts. The sociological aspect of culture describes the links between language and the customs and traditions of a country. The semantic sense describes the conceptual framework of the language and its speakers, and finally, the pragmatic aspect deals with the way cultural norms affect the discourse appropriate for any given context. Kramersch (1993) argues that cross-cultural awareness does not mean that learners should follow the norms and conventions of the target culture or that they should be provided with declarative knowledge about these norms and conventions. Instead, teachers should try to bring about cultural competence through providing the opportunity for learners to view their own culture in light of others and promote cross-cultural understanding. In this sense, literature and its various forms (drama, poetry, short story, etc.) can be used as an optimal tool to reflect each of the aspects of culture and also encourage cross-cultural comparisons.

Exposure to literary texts can also provide learners with the opportunity to practice the language skills. Widdowson (1979) believes that the 'deviant' or literary style of language used in literary texts draws the learners' attention towards itself and consequently improves a learners' understanding of how the target language functions. McKay (2001) claims that literary texts can be ideal for reading comprehension tasks, because they can stimulate interest and closer reading of the texts, as well as integrating the four skills during reading practice. With regards to speaking, literature can be ideal for oral practice and generating discussions about the characters, plot, themes and other aspects of the work. According to Stern (2001), literature can be used to inspire ESL/EFL writing both as a model and subject matter. McKay (2001) points out that literature can also offer a context for developing and expanding global listening skills. For instance, short stories can be read aloud to the students, and questions can be asked to check how much of the story has been understood by the class. Finally, as literary texts are far richer in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structure in comparison to other types of texts, they can also help improve these language components in learners. Kelly and Krishnan (1995) maintain that literary texts are too syntactically as well as lexically difficult for second language learners.

The application of literature in composition classes has been a bone of contention for many years (Belcher & Hireva, 2000). Various claims have been set forth both in favor of and against

using literary works for the purpose of teaching composition. The field of second language composition had not emerged until the 1980s (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). This emergence coincided with the dominance of the fields of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), both of which emphasized the process of needs analysis. Therefore, their proponents argued that learners should only be taught that style of writing which they would need to use in their own specific discourse communities. For this reason, literature was seen as having no relevance to learners' needs and was cast aside. There are those, however, who have challenged this belief and, as a result, there is still an ongoing debate among discourse communities with regards to L2 composition.

For those groups of students who are still attempting to achieve general literacy in the English language, and are not yet seeking membership in any particular discourse community, however, literature can be helpful in obtaining their goal. This argument may also hold true for most EFL learners who learn English for general, communicative purposes, and should these learners ever decide to gain membership within a specific (often academic) discourse community, the general literacy which they have previously achieved can give them a head start. Therefore, it seems logical for instructors dealing with students of this kind to use literature while presenting and practicing composition.

Using literature in composition courses can also prepare students for academic tasks and assignments. As Widdowson (1984) maintains that literary texts should be used for their rich interpretive potential and such texts have been said to bear the advantage of empowering learners with the much-needed analytic thinking skills required in academic circles (Gajdusek, 1988; Oster, 1989). Tasks requiring students to critique and analyze literary texts thus tend to improve critical thinking skills. Such skills could later be used for university assignments and discussions. In other words, learners who have had the experience of interpreting literary texts are also able to view other material presented to them from a critical perspective. What is more, reading and analyzing literature can help learners to become familiar with narrative styles and techniques for recounting events. Although it is commonly believed that expository writing is central to academic writing, narration is also widely used in writing project reports or in relating qualitative studies.

Literature can be incorporated into the composition classroom in a variety of techniques, the most prevalent of which is 'response to literature' (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000). In this technique,

students are first presented with a literary text such as a short story which they are supposed to read. Having read the text, they are then asked to write a report of their understanding, criticizing and providing accounts of personal interpretation and character analysis. This technique is particularly advantageous in that it provides learners with the opportunity to be involved in the process of meaning construction. Literature can also aid writing instruction through modeling and teaching grammar and structure (McKay & Petitt, 1984). Although not engaging directly in composition, such a 'language through literature' technique could greatly benefit learners, due to the centrality of language use and structure in written discourse.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study included 60 undergraduate students (46 females and 14 males) majoring in English literature at KUM Institute of Higher Education. The students were juniors and had all passed general English courses, including grammar and advanced writing. All learners had achieved a score of over 17 (out of 20) in the course on advanced writing, and all had a grade point average of over 16 (out of 20). The students had studied English for at least 2 years prior to being admitted to university and due to the nature of their field of study and the courses they had passed, they had experienced working with literary genres, such as the short story, poetry and drama in the English language. All students voluntarily participated in this study and were not granted any privilege over other classmates who had refused to take part.

The advanced writing course, which all participants had passed, focused on introducing brainstorming, organization and paragraph development (the three-part structure of introduction, body and conclusion) in essays of different types (argumentative, expository and narrative). Throughout this course, learners were tested on writing all three types of essays. In addition, students had passed two separate courses on grammar, through which they were familiarized with the various types of sentences (simple, compound, etc.) and clause and phrase types (adjective clause, adverbial clause, etc.) in English.

Data

Participants were randomly divided into two groups of 30. The first group (Group A) consisted of 6 males and 24 females; the second group (Group B) consisted of 8 males and 22 females).

Participants in the first group were asked to write a summary of approximately 2000 words after reading the short story *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, translated into English by Ian Johnston. They were each provided with a copy of the short story and were asked to read it prior to being given the assignment. In order to ensure that all participants read the story, they were initially told that they would be asked to answer comprehension questions based on the story's plot. After reading the story, students were required to complete the summary within 7 days. They were permitted and even encouraged to borrow words and phrases from the original text.

Participants of Group B, on the other hand, were required to compose a narrative of approximately 2000 words based on the following prompt:

Yesterday was the most hectic day of my entire life. It all started when...

This prompt was chosen because it was felt that in response, students would probably be more likely to write a narrative passage, rather than one which mostly included description, argumentation or other genres not desirable for this study. The students of this group were told that their story could be based upon their own life experiences or, on the other hand, be entirely fictional. However, they were specifically instructed not to base their story on any work of fiction which they had formerly studied. As with the first group, these participants were also given one week's time to complete the task.

Compositions by the participants of the two groups were scored by three raters, all three of which were experienced EFL teachers and had taught English writing at Iranian universities. Prior to initiating their work, the raters underwent a training session and a subsequent practice session. A single scale including criteria such as content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics (Jacobs *et al*, 1981) was chosen and used for rating the essays. The overall score for each participant was estimated by adding up the scores given by each of the raters. The maximum achievable score for each composition was 100. The scores given by each rater were then added to a total of 300 for each participant. The rating scale for each of the mentioned criteria has been included in Table 1.

Table1. Criteria values in the composition rating scale

	Content	Organization	Vocabulary	Language Use	Mechanics
Score	90	60	60	75	15

The independent sample t-test was used to discover whether there were any differences in the performance of the two groups in terms of the criteria mentioned above. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.5 was used to conduct the analysis. The alpha level was adjusted at 0.05.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics for the achieved results can be seen in Table 2. As can be seen, in terms of content, the mean score for the entire population was 78 out of 90; the maximum score on organization and vocabulary were both 31 from 60; the mean score for language use was 43 out of 75; and for mechanics, it was 6 out of 15. Overall, the entire population managed to achieve a mean score of 168 (out of 300) on the composition test.

Table2. Descriptive statistics for the achieved results

	N	Minimu m	Maximu m	Mean	Std. Deviation
Content	60	35.00	78.00	55.11	11.31
Organization	60	17.00	46.00	31.58	7.16
Vocabulary	60	18.00	50.00	31.36	8.19
Language Use	60	36.00	59.00	43.95	4.65
Mechanics	60	5.00	10.00	6.45	1.25
Overall	60	119.00	234.00	168.46	28.36
Valid N (listwise)	60				

First, using the independent-sample t-test, the aim was to determine whether the two groups were different in their overall performance on the composition task. All raters gave a score out of 100 to each composition, and the sum of the scores from all three raters constituted the overall score of 300. The results of the analysis can be seen in Table 3 below. The figures in the table demonstrate that the raters rated compositions written by members of the experimental group to

be significantly better than that of the control group. This is evident from the fact that the significance value (0.00) is smaller than the critical value (0.05).

Table3. Independent-sample t-test results for overall scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		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
Overall	Equal variances assumed	.00	.94	5.53	58	.00	33.06	5.97	21.10	45.02
	Equal variances not assumed			5.53	57.96	.00	33.06	5.97	21.10	45.02

One possible explanation for this difference in performance could very well be the difference in the cognitive processing loads imposed by the two tasks. In order to complete their respective tasks, members of the control group were required to come up with content for their compositions (i.e., theme, plot, characters, etc.) besides focusing on form; members of the experimental group, on the other hand, were merely required to summarize what they had formerly read. With regards to form, they were encouraged to borrow words and structural patterns from the text. This resulted in a task which probably required fewer cognitive processes and was, therefore, easier to handle.

The two groups were then compared based on the content of their essays. As previously mentioned, the maximum score on this criterion was 90. The results of the independent sample t-test can be seen in Table 4. The table reveals that the significance value (0.00) is smaller than the

critical value (0.05). Therefore, participants of the experimental group performed significantly better than their control-group counterparts.

Table 4. Independent-sample t-test results for content

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		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
Content	Equal variances assumed	.09	.75	8.33	58	.00	16.56	1.98	12.59	20.54
	Equal variances not assumed			8.33	57.92	.00	16.56	1.98	12.59	20.54

The fact that participants in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group with regards to content is not much of a surprise, since the former were, in a sense, using the short story as their content. As mentioned earlier, the latter had to start from scratch and provide original content for their compositions. In fact, during the course of this study, many students from the control group complained about the difficulty they experienced in the creative aspects of their writing. Eventually, some chose to base their writing on their own personal experiences, and others decided to come up with fictional stories. Nevertheless, the feedback from the two groups revealed that members of the control group had to invest a great deal of time and effort into thinking out the content of their compositions.

Participants of the two groups were then compared based on the organization of their compositions. The maximum achievable score on this criterion was 60. The independent-sample

t-test results for organization can be seen in Table 5. A comparison of the significance value (0.00) and the critical value (0.05) reveals that once again, the compositions written by participants of the first group were significantly better in terms of organization than those written by students of the second group.

Table5. Independent-sample t-test results for organization

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		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
Organiz	Equal variances assumed	.28	.59	4.28	58	.00	6.96	1.62	3.71	10.22
	Equal variances not assumed			4.28	57.80	.00	6.96	1.62	3.71	10.22

Basically, the same explanation provided for the higher achievement of control group learners on content could also account for the issue of organization. One aspect of creative writing is 'what to write about' and another closely-related issue is 'how to present and sequence content'. The second area requires narrative intelligence on the writer's behalf. That is, it is not merely enough to fabricate a story and work out its elements. For a successful composition, learners also had to figure out a suitable scheme for narrating their stories. Narrative techniques such as flashbacks and flash-forwards were occasionally used by members of the control group, but the raters found them confusing in most cases and not contributing to the composition's development. Members of the first group, on the other hand, used the exact same narrative style employed by the author of the short story, and were thus rated more positively in this regard.

The third criterion used for comparing the compositions of the two groups was vocabulary range. The maximum score for vocabulary range was 60. The results of the independent-sample

t-test are shown in Table 6. Because the significance value (0.00) is smaller than the critical value (0.05), it can be claimed that the experimental group participants outperformed the participants in the control group in terms of the range of vocabulary used in their compositions.

Table6. Independent-sample t-test results for vocabulary range

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		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
Vocab	Equal variances assumed	.75	.38	4.16	58	.00	7.80	1.87	4.05	11.54
	Equal variances not assumed			4.16	57.46	.00	7.80	1.87	4.05	11.54

Considering the range of vocabulary used, the participants of the two groups were not significantly different. However, when it came to precision in the selection of words and use of correct collocations, members of the experimental group once again had the upper hand. Being equal in general proficiency level, learners from the two groups were equipped with a roughly equal range of vocabulary. When writing, however, members of the control group had to select from a wide variety of synonymous words, which were different in their connotative shades of meaning and in addition, use the chosen word in its correct context and collocation. Once again, this added to the difficulty of the task required from members of the control group and resulted in poorer performance on their part.

Language criterion was the next criterion based on which the participants of the two groups were compared was language use. The scores given by the raters ranged from 0-75. The

independent-sample t-test was once again used, and the results can be seen in Table 7. Comparing the significance value (0.10) with the critical value (0.05) demonstrates that there was no significant difference between the compositions written by the two groups with regards to language use.

Table7. Independent-sample t-test results for language use

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		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
Lang-Use	Equal variances assumed	.15	.69	1.66	58	.10	1.96	1.18	-.40	4.33
	Equal variances not assumed			1.66	56.46	.10	1.96	1.18	-.40	4.33

When it came to language use, the two groups did not exhibit any significant difference. It was hypothesized that this was due to the fact that members of the experimental group had to summarize the story and could not borrow sentence structures from the text. In other words, they had to write their own sentences, and could not simply string sentences from the original text to each other, for this would have resulted in their compositions to lose its coherence and cohesion. Learners from the control group also faced this very same difficulty. As a result, we assume that for this reason, the two groups were not significantly different in their use of language.

The final criterion used to compare the performance of the two groups was the mechanics of writing. This criterion was rated on a scale ranging from 0-15. The results of the independent-sample t-test are shown in Table 8. As with the criterion of language use, there seems to be no

difference in the performance of the two groups on the mechanics of writing, since the critical value (0.05) turned out to be smaller than the significance value (0.47).

Table 8. Independent-sample t-test results for the mechanics of writing

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		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
Mechanics Equal variances assumed	2.21	.14	-.71	58	.47	-.23	.32	-.88	.41
Equal variances not assumed			-.71	56.55	.47	-.23	.32	-.88	.41

The mechanics of writing was another criteria based on which members of the two groups did not show any significant differences. One explanation for this could be that neither of the tasks given to the members of each group provided any model upon which they could base the mechanics of their compositions. Although the short story was used by the experimental group; due to the word-limit constraint, they were forced to compose their own sentences, and therefore, as far as punctuation was concerned, they were left on their own. Spelling errors were generally scarce in the compositions of both groups, because learners had ample time to check the spelling of words they were unsure about. A second explanation could be the use of words processors. In this study, learners were required to type their compositions; hence, the auto-correction software built into most word processing software could also account for the lack of a significant difference in mechanics between the two groups.

Conclusion

By using literary texts, such as short stories and drama, teachers can devise tasks which can scaffold learners in the process of writing instruction. Instead of overloading students with the burden of devising content, as well as attending to the form of their writing, teachers can provide the content and simultaneously draw learners' attention towards the stylistics of written discourse. Such a method should provide learners with the opportunity to first gain confidence in writing in a foreign language and then move on to more complex tasks which involve dealing with both content and form. What is more, the successful completion of such tasks can give learners a sense of accomplishment, which would increase the level of motivation within learners to continue writing in English. We believe that one of the reasons why learners currently lack interest and motivation in writing is because they are either prematurely encumbered by tasks which impose too many processes upon them, or regard tasks such as copying, paraphrasing and sentence writing as being disengaged from what they consider to be writing. Therefore, as mentioned, writing tasks making use of literary texts could eliminate both drawbacks.

An added advantage to such tasks is that they could be completed during the course of a term and need not necessarily be employed in a product-oriented fashion. That is, even aspects such as vocabulary, language use and the mechanics of writing which were shown to not be significantly improved, could be brought to the learners' attention through direct instruction or repeated correction. We believe that by using tasks such as the one described in this study, teachers can revitalize the important role that literature could potentially play in EFL instruction.

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