
The Effect of Prewriting Techniques on Yemeni EFL Tertiary Learners' Writing Skills

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Abstract

The present study investigated the effect of prewriting techniques on Yemeni EFL tertiary learners' writing skills and explored the improved writing aspects due to the use of these techniques. The study was quasi-experimental with intact groups and adopted a Pre-test and Post-test Nonequivalent Control Group Design. Only two groups of the first level students at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, Yemen were chosen as intact groups and assigned randomly as experimental and control groups. A composition proficiency test as a pre-test was administered shortly before conducting the experimental treatment to check the homogeneity among the participants. During sixteen sessions and over a period of two months, the treatment took place. The experimental group subjects were trained and exposed to six different prewriting techniques, while the subjects of the control group were not exposed to those six techniques. Shortly after the treatment period was over, the post-test was administered. Immediately after the post-test, the subjects of the experimental group were asked to respond to a short interview (Talk aloud protocol). The subjects of the experimental group showed statistically significant improvement in their written performance. Further investigation was carried out and the results revealed that the organization of ideas and content were the most improved aspects of writing due to the use of prewriting techniques.

Keywords : Prewriting techniques, writing skills, process approach, EFL.

บทคัดย่อ

วิจัยนี้ได้ศึกษาผลของเทคนิคการร่างงานเขียนต่อทักษะการเขียนของผู้เรียนระดับอุดมศึกษาชาวเยเมนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ และศึกษามุมของการเขียนที่ดีขึ้นจากการใช้เทคนิคเหล่านี้ การวิจัยนี้เป็นการวิจัยกึ่งทดลองกับกลุ่มท่าเที่ยมกันและใช้กลุ่มควบคุมที่ไม่ท่าเที่ยมกัน-วัดผลก่อนและหลังการทดลอง มีนักเรียนเพียงสองกลุ่มจากนักเรียนระดับต้นจากภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะครุศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยชั้นนำของประเทศไทย ที่ได้รับเลือกให้เป็นกลุ่มท่าเที่ยมและได้รับการสุ่มเป็นกลุ่มทดลองและกลุ่มควบคุม มีการทดสอบความชำนาญของคู่ประกอบในฐานะที่เป็นการทดสอบก่อนการทดลองไม่นานก่อนการปฏิบัติการทดลองเพื่อตรวจสอบความเป็นเอกพันธุ์ของผู้เข้าร่วม การทดลองมีทั้งหมด 16 ขั้นตอนและใช้เวลามากกว่า 2 เดือน เป้าหมายกลุ่มทดลองได้รับการฝึกฝนและใช้เทคนิคการร่างงานเขียนที่แตกต่างกัน 6 เทคนิค ในขณะที่เป้าหมายกลุ่มควบคุมไม่ได้ใช้เทคนิคทั้ง 6 มีการทดสอบหลังการทดลองไม่นานหลังจากการทดลองสิ้นสุดลง เป้าหมายกลุ่มทดลอง ลูกสัมภาษณ์สั้นๆทันทีหลังการทดสอบ (วิธีการพูดออกม้าดังๆ) เป้าหมายกลุ่มทดลองแสดงให้เห็นถึงพัฒนาการที่ดีขึ้นต่อประสิทธิภาพการเขียนอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ มีการศึกษาอื่นๆตามมาและผลการวิจัยพบว่าการจัดระบบความคิดและเนื้อหาเป็นแข็งของการเขียนที่ดีขึ้นมากที่สุดเนื่องจากการใช้เทคนิคการร่างงานเขียน

คำสำคัญ : เทคนิคการร่างงานเขียน ทักษะการเขียน ขั้นตอนกระบวนการ การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL)

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the English basic skills that students should learn at schools and the university level. As one of the English language skills, it is of great significant to communication. Moreover, it helps students to learn by reinforcing the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary. Furthermore, writing can develop their critical thinking and enable them discover something new to write about or a new way of expressing their ideas (Raimes, 1985). Therefore, given the importance of writing in language learning and teaching is essential for language teachers to help their students become effective writers. This may be done by providing them with the most appropriate way for teaching writing, encouraging them and avoiding any thing that may hinder their development.

Writing, the subject to be investigated in this study, is accepted to be the most difficult skill (Richards, 1990). “It is clearly a complex process, and competent

writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/ second language learners" (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 1987, p. 2).

In an English as foreign language (EFL) classroom, many students and instructors feel that writing is a chore. Students are always hesitant to write because they are inhibited and afraid of making mistakes. Many student writers cannot generate ideas and get started on their topic in hand (Wasko, 2011). This is because they either were interrupted by others during the class-period and cannot concentrate, or they lack the techniques for generating ideas, collecting information, and getting started on a writing topic. Prewriting stage has different activities/ techniques/ strategies, in which they help to generate ideas, collect information, get started, and facilitate the writing process (Maham and Nejadansari, 2012). Many researchers (Zamel, 1981; Spack, 1984; D'Aoust, 1986, Oluwadiya, 1992) have emphasized the facilitative role of prewriting techniques for the writing process. For example, Zamel (1981) states that "students first of all need ideas to explore and write about, while more skilled writers have established certain methods that allow them to proceed with this exploration, less proficient writers need to be taught how to make use of prewriting strategies or invention techniques" (p. 203). Spack (1984) asserts that prewriting techniques teach students to write down their ideas quickly in raw form, without undue concern about surface errors and form. This practice helps their fluency, as they are able to think and write at the same time, rather than think and then write.

At the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, Yemen the students are supposed to study for four academic years to complete their BA Degree in Education. During this period, they must pass five obligatory writing courses; two writing English courses (writing I and writing II) in the first year, two writing English courses (writing III and writing IV) in the second year, and the last course (advanced writing) in the third year. The general objective of these courses, as reported by Sharyan (2007), is to develop the students writing skills required to cope with the various communicative needs in their academic studies as well as later on in their careers. At the Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, where the present study took place, EFL writing is mostly taught through traditional methods and techniques. Instructors consider writing as a type of assignment, in which their roles are to assign topics to student to write about, correct some writing assignments by spotting out all grammatical errors

and mistakes, and giving grades. Students are not allowed to correct their own mistakes by themselves or with the help of their peers because the teacher does it for them (Naif, 2003). As a result, they are still committing the same mistake and errors and this actually reflects the student's reluctance towards writing. Such instructors as well as students look at writing as a one step activity, and they ignore what it is called the writing processes (prewriting, writing, and rewriting) and the different strategies related to each stage.

Actually, the studies conducted on the field of the present study revealed that students neither prepare plans, nor apply any of the prewriting strategies. For example, Shamsher (1994) reported that students did not prepare any plan before embarking on any writing process. This was also confirmed by Al-Mahfadi (2005) that they never applied any of the prewriting strategies because they had not been taught those strategies or thought that planning stage is not important for a writing process. Therefore, there is a need for conducting a study on the effect of prewriting techniques on developing the EFL student's writing skills since, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no systematic study has been undertaken so far on the effect of teaching prewriting techniques on EFL student's writing skills in the area where the present study will be conducted. Accordingly, the present study is an attempt to find out the possibility of developing the EFL Yemeni students' performance in writing through teaching them explicitly prewriting techniques. This study is supposed to touch the society need and solve many of the students' difficulties in writing skills.

2. Research Objectives

To fulfill the purpose of this study the following objectives were proposed:

- 2.1 To examine the effect of prewriting techniques on Yemeni EFL learners' writing skills.
- 2.2 To find out what aspect(s) of writing is/ are more improved due to the use of those techniques.

The study also seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. To what extent do prewriting techniques affect the Yemeni EFL learners' writing skills.
2. What aspects of writing are more improved due to the use of prewriting techniques (in case of improvement)?

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The procedures of quasi-experimental design were followed in this study since it was not possible for the researchers to select or assign subjects randomly. Creswell (2005) declares that such design may occur in which researchers need to use intact groups because of the availability of the participants or because the setting prohibits forming artificial groups. Consequently, the quasi-experimental (Pretest-Post-test Non- equivalent Control Group Design), or as Leedy and Ormrod (2005) called it (Nonrandomized Control Group Pretest-Post-test Design), was used as the experimental design for the study. The researcher assigned two intact classes as the experimental and control groups, administered a pretest to both groups at the same time, and conducted the treatment to both groups to assess the differences between them.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population in this study was the first level program students at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, Yemen. They were 180 students, out of which only 25 were male students. The first level consisted of three groups, and for the purpose of teaching and collecting data for the present study, the researcher chose two groups after excluding the third group since it contains only girls. As a result, the remaining two groups were the participants of the study (convenience sampling).

The two groups of respondents (i.e. group "B" and group "C") were randomly assigned to the groups required by the study design by using 'flip coin strategy'. The result was that group "B" represented the experimental group (G1), and group "C" represented the control group (G2). The total number of the subjects who were present in the day of administering the pretest was one hundred and twelve; fifty seven were in the experimental group and fifty five were in the control group. While only one hundred and three subjects were present in the day of administering the post-test; fifty three were in the experimental group and fifty were in the control group. Therefore, the available participants in the two groups were the sample of the study and they were fifty students in each group (44 girls and 6 boys in the experimental group; 39 girls and 11 boys in the control group) and they were included in the actual work and data collection of the study.

3.3 Research Instruments

The data in this study were collected through two instruments developed by the researcher; pretest, post-test and talk aloud protocol.

3.3.1 Pretest and Post-test: For the sake of answering the research questions, the researchers developed two Composition Proficiency Tests. Hughes (1989) indicates that the appropriate way to test people's writing ability is to get them to write. These consisted of two paralleled composition proficiency tests to be used as the pretest and post-test for the experiment. The subjects in both groups are required to write two compositions in two similar topics of general knowledge.

Choosing such an instrument was intended to compare the subject's performance in writing before and after the experimental treatment respectively.

3.3.2 Talk Aloud Protocol (TAP): Talk Aloud Protocol (TAP) was used to assess the subjects' process. Ericsson and Simon (1980) clarify that TAP involves participants only describing their action but not giving explanation. This method was thought to be more objective in that participants merely report how they went about completing a task rather than interpreting or justifying their actions. It is believed that such an instrument procedure can yield rich data, "since it elicits information which is kept in short term memory and is thereby directly accessible for further processing and verbalization. The other method cannot always be relied on to produce data stemming directly from subject's actual experience or thought processes" (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989, p. 170). Therefore, students of the experimental group were subjected to a short interview to express clearly and briefly what they did exactly in the post-test.

3.4 Data Collection

The process for collecting data in this study passed through a number of stages:

3.4.1 Administering the Pretest: The subjects in both groups of the study were given a composition proficiency test as the pretest. They were asked to write a paragraph on only one topic out of three of a general knowledge, provided with the needed instructions about the test before and during the test and told that this test is a part of their assignment to take the matter more seriously. Also, the subjects in both groups took the pretest at the same time (in the morning) and were given enough time (about sixty minutes) to finish their test.

3.4.2 Teaching the Two Groups: A week after the administration of the pretest, the two groups were subjected to the treatment which lasted for eight weeks, two classes (one and a half hour for each class) per a week for each group. During that duration, the subjects of the experimental group were exposed to six prewriting techniques (brainstorming by listing, brainstorming by clustering, wh-questions, cubing, free-writing, and outlining) and trained how to use these techniques to help them in generating ideas, collecting information, and organizing thoughts before embarking in the actual writing process. While the control group students were not exposed to these prewriting techniques at all. They only were taught the conventional for teaching writing in which the teacher assigned a topic and asked them to write a composition, then collected their assignments for correction and evaluation.

3.4.3 Administering the Post-test: Shortly after the experimental treatment was over and exactly a week after it, the post-test was administered. The subjects in both groups sat for a composition proficiency test. They were asked to write a paragraph on only one topic out of three of a general knowledge. The questions in this test were not the same of those of pretest but they were identical. Also, they were asked to submit their drafts at the end of the test.

3.4.4 Applying the Talk Aloud Protocol (TAP): Immediately after finishing the post-test, the subjects of the experimental group were asked to respond to a short interview in which they can talk precisely and briefly on what they did before they started writing their compositions.

3.4.5 ESL Composition Profile: To evaluate the students written performance in the pretest and post-test, the researchers used a ready-made scale (ESL Composition Profile) which was designed by Hartfiel, Hughey, Wormuth, and Jacobs (1985). It was divided into five component/ aspect scales; content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Each of these components/ aspects had ranged at different levels which were controlled by certain criteria that were attributed to the subject's actual performance. The total mark of the profile was 100 and it was distributed to 30, 20, 20, 25, and 5 as high marks for each of the component scales of the profile respectively.

Two experienced teachers of writing at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University were selected as evaluators for the pretest and post-test composition papers of the study and on their turn they revealed their cooperation with the researchers. They were trained to use the ESL composition profile on three papers as

samples and given enough time to finish evaluation. When they finished marking, simple statistical analyses were carried out to ensure the reliability of marking. Hughes (1989) indicates that multiple scoring should ensure scorer reliability, even if not all scorers are using quite the same standard. “Nevertheless, once scoring is completed, it is useful to carry out simple statistical analyses to discover if anyone’s scoring is unacceptably aberrant” (p. 97). Therefore, the correlation between the two markings of the pretest was carried out.

Table 1 : Pearson’s correlation between the two markings of both tests

Correlations		
Pretest Marking	Pearson Correlation	.963 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	100
Post-test Marking	Pearson Correlation	.979 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	100

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

Table 1 : Pearson’s correlation between the two markings of both tests

Table 1 above shows that the results of the correlation between the two markings are statistically significant. It was found to be ($r = .963$, $p. = .000$) for the pretest marking. For the post test, it was found to be ($r = .979$, $p. = .000$).

3.5 Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data collected, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The statistical tools used were: Independent samples t-test, Paired t-test and Descriptive statistics. The independent samples t-test was used after administering the pretest to prove that both groups were equivalent before the treatment. It was also used after the treatment to analyze the data by comparing the performance of both groups with respect to their performance in the post-test. Such a test qualified as the most appropriate statistical measurement since only two variable and/ or two groups were involved. A paired t-test was used to answer the question “which aspect(s) is/ are more improved?” by comparing the mean of those aspects in both tests of the experimental group. Descriptive statistics were also used

to find out the mean and standard deviation. Frequencies also helped in answering the question “what are the most frequently used prewriting techniques?”

The results were interpreted to the two tailed level of significance (0.05) which is the most commonly preferred value. Therefore, when the significance level computed for two variables is smaller or equal to 0.05, the two groups are considered to be different and there is a significant difference between the groups for the sake of the group which has the higher mean. When it is greater than 0.05, then it means that there is no significant difference between the groups ; i.e. the two groups are considered equal according to the mean scores.

Moreover, Cohen's d effect sizes was used in this study and especially to answer the first question. It is used to determine the size of the predicted effect. An effect size is the difference between two means (e.g., treatment minus control) divided by the standard deviation of the two conditions. The results obtained from this process or calculation is subjected to a certain scale in order to judge that this effect sizes are small, medium, or large. “Cohen's suggestion that effect sizes of .20 are small, .50 are medium, .80 are large enables us to compare an experiment's effect-size results to known benchmarks” (Thalheimer and Cook, 2002, p. 2).

4. Results

4.1 Answering the first question: To what extent do prewriting techniques affect Yemeni EFL learners' writing skills?

To determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental group and the control group on the overall pretest score, a t-test on the difference between the experimental and control groups' pretest mean scores was calculated. The analysis of the mean scores showed that there were no significant differences at the starting point of the study.

Table 2 *Independent samples t-test between experimental and control groups pretest (n=50)*

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	T	Sig.
Experimental	68.49	9.43	98	0.655	0.514
Control	67.03	12.62			

Table 2 above reveals that there is no statistically significant difference in the pretest scores between the two groups. The pretest mean of the experimental group ($M=68.49$) is not significantly different from that of the control group ($M=67.03$). As far as the standard deviation shows the standard of how far out from the point of central tendency (Mean) the individual scores are distributed. The standard deviation of the experimental group (9.43) is approximately closer to the standard deviation of the control group (12.62).

The two groups are, therefore, diagnosed to be more of homogeneous groups because of the fact that the smaller the standard deviation, the closer the distribution is to be to the central point.

The significance value (sig. 2-tailed) of the test (0.514) is larger than 0.05 which indicates the lack of significant difference between the groups and they are similar in their writing performance before the treatment. By this, it could be safely concluded that both groups are homogenous and equivalent.

Since the two group are homogenous in the pretest, any difference was found in their performance in the post-test could be safely attributed to the effect of the treatment. To examine whether or not there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and post-test scores for students in the experimental group a t-test on the difference (paired sample t-test) between the mean pretest and post-test scores was used.

Table 3 below shows a significant improvement in overall test scores from the pretest to the post-test. It presents the means and standard deviation of the post-test scores for the experimental group.

Table 3 Paired samples t-test for the experimental group's pre/post tests

Experimental Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig.
Pre-test	68.49	9.43	49	-12.14	0.000
Post-test	79.62	10.05			

Table 3 reveals that there is a difference between the pretest and post-test scores of the experimental group for the sake of those of the post test. The mean in the post-test ($M= 79.62$) is significantly higher than the pretest mean ($M= 68.49$) Also, the standard deviation of the post-test (10.05) is larger than that of the pretest (9.43).

Therefore, it can be inferred that there is a statistical significant difference between the performance of the experimental group on the pre and post tests for the sake of the post-test. This difference between the means existed as a result of the prewriting techniques that the subjects were trained and exposed to during the experiment. Similarly, the mean scores in the post-test of the experimental and control group were compared

A t-test (independent-samples t-test) on the difference between the mean pretest and post-test scores were used. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Means scores of the experimental and control groups in the post test

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig.
Experimental	79.62	10.05	98	5.090	0.000
Control	68.33	12.03			

It is clear from Table 4, that post-test mean of the experimental group ($M= 79.62$, $SD = 10.05$) is significantly higher than the post test mean of the control group ($M= 68.33$, $SD = 12.03$). This indicates that there is a significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups for the sake of the experimental group which has a higher mean. However, to make this conclusion more valid, more investigation of the post-test scores was made by computing t-value between the two groups. This analysis shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. This difference is significant at the 0.05 level, as the resultant t-value is 5.09 and its significance is 0.000 ($p < 0.05$).

After that, a simple calculation was done to know the size of that effect. This calculation was Cohen's d from t-test by using the following equality:

$$\text{Cohen's effect size} = \frac{\text{the experimental group's mean} - \text{the control groups' mean}}{\text{Standard deviation (pooled)}}$$

$$d = \frac{X_t - X_c}{S_{\text{pooled}}}$$

and it was = 1.03 which is, according to Cohen's effect size, large effect. The same calculation was carried by using the Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet and the result was the same (1.03) which indicates that the effect size between the groups is a large effect.

4.2 Answering the Second Question: What aspects of writing are more improved due to the use of prewriting techniques (in case of improvement)?

To answer this question, a t-test (paired samples statistics) was used to compare the means of the scores gained by the experimental group pre and post tests in the five aspects of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics). The results are shown in the following table.

Table 6 Mean scores of the five aspect of writing in the experimental group's pre and post tests

Aspect	Test	Mean	Std. Deviation	d.	df	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Content	Pre-	19.79	2.86	4.84	49	-11.65	0.000
	Post-	24.63	3.25				
Organization	Pre-	14.91	1.87	2.31	49	-12.22	0.000
	Post-	17.22	1.47				
Vocabulary	Pre-	14.18	2.31	1.59	49	-5.93	0.000
	Post-	15.77	2.28				
Language Use	Pre-	16.29	3.37	1.82	49	-6.22	0.000
	Post-	18.11	3.28				
Mechanics	Pre-	3.32	0.54	0.57	49	-8.92	0.000
	Post-	3.89	0.56				

Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations of the five aspects of writing in which the subjects of the experimental group were tested in the pretest and the post-test. The table also shows the subjects' improvement (i.e. 'd' scores) in these aspects from the pretest to the post-test. The 'd' scores show the difference between the means of the pretest and post-test of the subjects in the five aspects of writing. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the scores of all the five aspects/ components of the writing skills between the pretest and post test of the experimental group for the sake of the post test and by looking to the t-value of those aspects, it become clear that the most improved aspects were organization and content respectively

The data in this table obviously indicate that the subjects in the experimental group achieved significant improvements in all the five aspects of writing between the pretest and post-test, during the experimental treatment. However, the most improved aspects are: organization and content.

5. Discussion

The study results are discussed in relation to the previous studies. The study revealed that the used prewriting techniques have a great effect on developing the students' performance in writing skills. This result goes in congruence with the results obtained by some studies in the field of ESL and EFL. For example, Pope and Prater (1990), Baru (1998), and Al-Ghafry (1999) confirm the usefulness of the prewriting techniques in improving the overall writing performance. Pope and Prater found that the students' writing product was improved when they used the prewriting strategies. Baru asserted that students who practiced prewriting activities performed better in their writing than those who did not practice them. Al-Ghafry (1999) reported that prewriting strategy instruction has a significant effect on developing the students' writing skills. However, this result is incongruent with the findings of Hashempour, Rostampour and Bahjat (2015) that there is no significant relationship between brainstorming, its subcategories and the written performance of the students. Moreover, there were significant improvements in all the five aspects of the learners' written performance. However, organization and content were the most improved aspects. These findings are congruent with Baru's (1998) research findings who reported that the students were only improved in two aspects; the content and organization of ideas

6. Conclusion

Based on the analysis as well as the interpretation of results, the following conclusions are drawn below:

Yemeni EFL tertiary learners ignore using prewriting techniques as a planning stage before embarking on their writing compositions for one reason or another and consequently this hinders their development in writing. This is supported by the

findings of the pretest which indicate that the subjects in both groups had not been taught and exposed to such techniques.

In this study, teaching different prewriting techniques has a positive effect on Yemeni EFL tertiary learners' writing improvement. This improvement in the achievement of the experimental group is attributed to the implementation of prewriting techniques which enable students to be effective writers and overcome their difficulty in collecting information, generating ideas, and getting started before writing. Regarding this improvement, the study revealed that Yemeni EFL tertiary learners showed significant improvement in all the five aspects/ components of writing. However, the organization of ideas and content were the most improved ones due to the use of prewriting techniques. Moreover, the prewriting techniques used in the study varied in their occurrence; however, the most frequently used techniques were free-writing, brainstorming by clustering and outlining.

7. Implications and Recommendations

In the light of the findings and results discussion, some pedagogical implications are generated on the effect of prewriting techniques in particular and on practicing the writing process in general as a way of improving Yemeni EFL tertiary learners' level in writing skills. It is recommended that EFL learners should be trained and exposed to different prewriting techniques as well as different writing process strategies as early as possible during their study in high school. This will enable them to come to the tertiary level ready to deal with composition of different types. Also, EFL teachers should encourage their students and raise their awareness of those techniques. In addition, EFL teachers should determine when their students are ready to be taught and to use the prewriting techniques as a way of inventing and discovering ideas since unskilled writers lack the working vocabulary necessary to explore and expand the ideas they discover. Therefore, teaching them those techniques have only a limited effect on their writing quality. Consequently, they have to provide their students with the needed vocabulary to engage with content.

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