The Use of Model Essays in Developing EFL Students' Written Performance at University Level

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1. The Theoretical Part:

1.1 Introduction:

Writing, in general and that of foreign language (henceforth FL) in particular is a complex activity. It is one of the important skills which students must learn and develop especially in English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) context. According to Hadely (2000), writing is viewed as a combination of mechanical or formal aspects of writing and the complex act of composing. As such, students, writing in the FL, have to learn how to be proficient in the use of language as well as to develop writing strategies, techniques, and skills.

In spite of the numerous approaches to the teaching of writing, academic essay writing is still one of the challenging areas for both teachers and students. FL students still call for the need to write error free texts and they enter language courses expecting that they will graduate as proficient writers in the FL. Therefore, this study is concerned, in its theoretical part, with presenting the concept of model essay, what does it mean, and how it is used as a teaching strategy in promoting FL writers to notice and make advantage of the correct use of language. In the practical part of the current research, the role of using model essays as a teaching strategy instead of the traditional methods used at university level which are mostly based on rule explanations is to be investigated. By employing this strategy, the crucial point is that EFL students will benefit and improve their writing skill by training on model essays. This kind of training involves: reading the model essay, noticing what errors it includes, and correcting these errors.

Moreover, the relationship between model essays and the noticing hypothesis is to be highlighted in addition to some problematic issues which EFL students face in their essay-writing course. Such issues are pursued in the following questions:

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1- Are the lexical, formal, and discoursal categories the main keys of success in EFL writing?

2- Would EFL students' writing improve by using model essays as a teaching strategy?

1.2 What's a Model Essay?

From the viewpoint of educational psychology, model essays can be regarded as stimulating a particular effective mode of learning, viz. imitation learning, or learning by example. Thus, a model essay is considered an effective tool which provides the opportunity to acquire the essential writing skill in the FL. A model essay is defined by Charney and Carlson (1995:90-91) as "text written by a specific writer in a specific situation that is subsequently re-used to exemplify a genre that generalizes over writers in such situations". The re-use of such texts depends highly on the writing task itself in addition to several factors that must be there in selecting them as effective models. These factors include: (1) the representative aspects of the model essay, (2) the situation in which the model essay was written, and (3) the appropriateness of the model essay content.

Lai and Tam (2001:401), on their part, define model essays as "authentic texts of appropriate level of difficulty and suitable topic that can be better for both the interests and the needs of the students". Lai and Tam demonstrate that such model texts give FL learners the opportunity to formulate clearly the aim behind a certain writing task. Moreover, successful analysis of the model text promotes learners' self-esteem and generates stronger interest and motivation to write in the FL.

In an attempt to research the usefulness of models and discover more uses of them, Gobel (2010:1) defines model essays as being "essential in product writing, which focuses on a final product and where the learner is engaged in imitating, copying, and transforming models of correct language". He goes in line with what Nunan (1991) believes in that learners' focus must be on how to write more than on what to write. This means that emphasis is on the process of writing rather than on the product itself.

In the current research, a model essay is being defined as a vehicle or a means for the noticing hypothesis to take action (see section 1.3 for what the noticing hypothesis is). In other words, a model essay is a finished

piece of written work, an essay in our case, which provides an effective environment for the learners to train to notice and correct different erroneous language chunks, namely lexical, formal, and discoursal components of the written text (see section 2.4). Such process of training thus will help learners to acquire the correct, useful language to be used in their future writing. For instance, with this mode of learning (and hence, with model essays) learners not only have the opportunity to deduce rules of correct language usage; but also might benefit from the experience of consulting a successful treatment of the topic in question.

1.3 Noticing and Foreign Language Writing:

There has been a growing body of research investigating the function of noticing in FL learning and how this function helps learners to overcome their linguistic problems (cf. Truscott, 1998). The noticing hypothesis questions the aspects of language FL writers' notice and encounter in their output when composing.

According to Schmidt (1990, 1995, 2001, cited in Carroll 2006:17), the noticing hypothesis emphasizes that (1) FL learners must become aware of certain aspects of language, mainly meaning, (2) learners need to notice all aspects of language equally, such as lexicon, grammatical form, sound, and pragmatic features, and (3) the distinction between (noticing) and (understanding); the former deals with surface level language phenomena, while the latter is related to learning at a more abstract level.

Different researchers in the context of FL writing have employed the noticing hypothesis. Swain and Lapkin (1995), for example, examined whether learners' output allows them to become aware of their language problems when writing in FL. By analyzing the think-aloud protocols of the participants, the researchers identified and classified what is called (language-related episodes) into several groups based on the type of language problems. By so doing, Swain and Lapkin concluded that participants modified their writing output when they noticed their language problems.

In an attempt to contribute to the noticing function of output, Soleimani et al. (2008) investigated how FL learners notice their linguistic problems to facilitate their gain of rhetorical structures. An experiment was conducted in which one group of participants was to write on a contrast topic, while a comparison group was to write on a non-contrast topic, and

still another comparison group was to receive the teacher's deductive instruction and explanation of contrast paragraphs in English followed by an output to produce a contrast-related paragraph. The results reveal an effect of output activities on learners' noticing the targeted structures and forms.

Although there have been some researches examining the effectiveness of noticing in FL writing, the use of model essays as a means for promoting FL learners to notice the correct use of language still calls for investigation. As such, the current research aims to examine how EFL students at university level could benefit from reading model essays and doing noticing and correcting tasks in three stages: (1) search for errors in the model essay they are reading, (2) correct these errors, and (3) record them for later use. In this way, learners need to have a useful language to include in the writing they are preparing for.

1.4 Model Essays Use as a Teaching Strategy:

The use of model essays in developing FL learners' writing skills is a thorny area of study. Researchers have been divided into two parties in relation to exploring the role of using model essays as a pedagogical strategy.

The first party supports using a model essay in this concern. Such kind of use stems from the relationship between reading and writing. Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) claim that FL learners find it difficult to acquire writing skills by writing only. Learners have to read different kinds of material in the form of model essays, which gives them the opportunity to become aware of the various aspects of the FL. In a similar vein, both Smagorinsky (1992) and Cumming (1995) emphasize the beneficial use of model essays because such essays provide FL writers with the sufficient amount of what is called content knowledge and rhetorical aspects of texts.

However, model essays should not always be viewed as a successful tool for the better achievement in FL writing contexts. For instance, Goby (1997) states that model essays prevent FL learners from being creative in their writing. By the same token, Werner (1989) questions the effectiveness of model essays. He treats them as being less valuable than other kinds of intervention in writing instructions. Such a drawback lies behind the fact that learners may misuse models, and imitate not only the strengths of the model, but also its weaknesses. Furthermore, Collins and Gentner (1980) criticize the use of model essays because in their view point, such essays

draw attention away from content aspects and emphasize the formal aspects of the written text instead.

Motivated by the issues discussed so far in relation to the use of model essays in FL contexts, it is hypothesized that:

1-   Students who receive model essay training make fewer lexical errors on average than students who receive rule based explanation.

2-   Students who receive model essay training make fewer form errors on average than students who receive rule based explanation.

3-   Students who receive model essay training make fewer discourse errors on average than students who receive rule based explanation.

2. The Practical Part:
2.1 Research Design:

This experimental study has a pre- post test control group research design. It aims to find whether or not the use of model essays as a teaching strategy has a positive effect on improving learner's writing in the FL. Both the control group and the experimental group were given a pre-test prior to the presentation of model essay training to the experimental group, followed, then, by the training period which was followed on completion by the post-test of both groups.

With a control group research design, it is essential to have demonstrably comparable groups. The best way to guarantee this is to assign participants to either the experimental or the control group at random, and to show that the groups do not differ in important variables.

2.2 Participants:

All participants in this research were Iraqi undergraduate students from the Department of English/ college of Basic Education/ University of Mosul. Ten students, (4) males and (6) females, with a median age of (22) years were recruited from the third level at this Dept. The researcher's decision to recruit subjects from this specific level stemmed from two reasons: (1) they have, at this level, two courses specified for teaching essay writing, and (2) students in this level usually get, during the previous academic year, two courses, namely composition writing and grammar, that are closely related to the variables under investigation.

The ten participants were at par in their achievement of studying EFL. They were chosen depending on the grades they have got in their examinations of the previous year. These grades were taken from the examination committee at the Department. Moreover, participants were randomly divided into two groups, the experimental group and the control group with five students assigned to each group.

2.3 Materials:

To achieve the basic aim of this study, namely comparing between model essays based training and rule based instruction, the researcher employed two types of material.

The control group, which was exposed to rule based instruction, was taught using material taken from Alexander's (1989) book "Essay and Letter Writing". The first three chapters of part one of this book were used; these chapters include the explanation of rules regarding three levels of writing: sentence, paragraph, and essay levels. The following example is an illustration of rules used in this book to join sentences to make complex sentences:

I can't remember (where did I leave, where I left) my coat.

(Complete the following sentence by choosing one of the two phrases given in brackets).

As for the experimental group which was trained by using model essays, the type of material used was taken from the preparation course for the TOEFL test designed by Phillips (2003). Seven essays were taken from the section specified for testing written English. Each essay included noticing and correcting errors related to the lexical, form, and discourse variables. These errors were distributed over the seven essays and sub-categorized further as follows: (1) lexical: selecting words, phrases, and expressions; (2) form: sentence structure, inversion and agreement, verb form, tense, prepositions, comparative and superlative, punctuation, and spelling; (3) discourse: logical sequencing (cohesion and coherence, organization of paragraphs, inter-sentential relationship, and cohesive devices). See the following example taken from the essays used in the training:

Original text: "…I believe that a university education will give me a much rich and better life…"

Corrected text: "…I believe that a university education will give me a richer and better life…"

The researcher modified these essays partially to suit the aim of the practical part of the study. Instead of keeping meaningful paragraph divisions, these essays were reformulated into one complete unit. The reason behind such reformulation was to train the experimental group on the categories included within the discourse variable mentioned above.

2.4 Procedure:

As mentioned earlier, the experiment involves a pre-test and a post-test phase. As a pre-test both the control and experimental groups were given a writing assignment. All participants were asked to write a descriptive essay of not more than (250) words, describing "A Walk on Sunday Morning". The purpose of this pre-test was to determine whether or not the two groups were equal with respect to the lexical, formal, and discoursal variables.

The second phase of the experiment (the training phase) lasted four weeks, from the 1st of December (2010) till the 1st of January (2011). During this phase, the experimental and the control groups were working separately. The experimental group got two hours of model essay based training per week. The framework of this training was basically meant to comprise the silent reading of the model essay first. Then, students were asked to re-read the essay noticing whatever errors were there in the essay trying to correct these errors by discussing them with the researcher herself.

In contrast, the control group participants received rule-based instruction through traditional methods two hours per week. They had to follow a course book which was prepared especially for teaching essay writing. Relying on this book, students were taught instructional rules covering three areas, viz. the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay areas. These rules were related to the teaching of, for instance, the types of sentences, joining sentences, tenses, word order, building up the descriptive paragraph, and building up the descriptive essay.

Turning to the third phase of the experiment, both groups were exposed to a post-test on training completion. Students were asked to write a descriptive essay of not more than (250) words, describing this time their town or village as it was a hundred years ago. This test was meant to determine whether or not students in the experimental group showed any

advantage, i.e. made fewer errors in the lexical, formal and discoursal variables, by training on noticing and correcting errors by reading model essays. In other words, the aim of this test was to discover any differences the training had brought about in the results of the participants.

2.5 Analysis of Results:

After counting the errors in each essay, all subsequent statistical analyses were done using IBM SPSS (ver.16) software package. In order to adjust for the different lengths of the participants' essays, the absolute numbers of errors were normalized to give the error rates per (100) words. For each of the relevant variables (lexical, formal, and discoursal), the error rate calculation was done as follows:
(100_* error count_/ word count) gives the error rate by 100 words.

The second step was to compare the experimental and control group achievements in both the pre- and post-tests for the lexical, formal, and discoursal errors per 100 words. In consideration of the small sample size, the median (MDN) was computed as a measure of central tendency throughout. For the lexical variable, in the pre-test the mean error rate for the experimental group is (MDN= 13.3), while the mean error rate for the control group is (MDN= 16.2). In the post-test, the mean error rate for the experimental group is (MDN= 4.9), while it is (MDN= 15.2) for the control group as shown in figure (1) below:
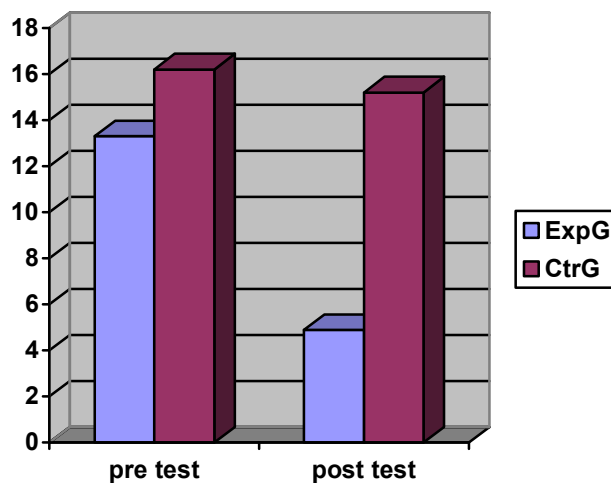
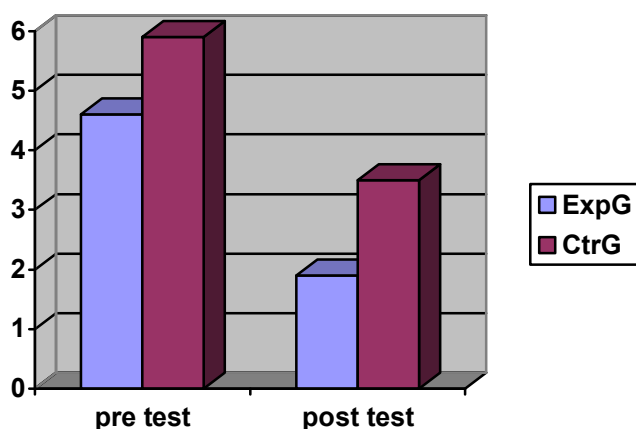**Figure (1): Lexical errors per 100 words (median)**

Turning to the formal variable, in the pre-test the mean error rate for the experimental group is (MDN= 13.3), while it is (MDN= 18.9) for the control group. In the post-test, the mean error rate for the experimental group is (MDN= 5.2), while it is (MDN= 19.2) for the control group. These results are presented in figure (2):
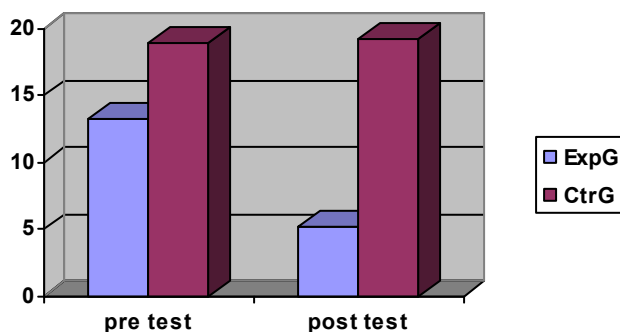
Figure (2): Formal errors per 100 words (median)

As regards the discoursal variable, the mean error rate for the experimental group in the pre-test is (MDN= 4.6), while it is (MDN= 5.9) for the control group. In the post-test, the mean error rate for the experimental group is (MDN= 1.9), while it is (MDN= 3.5) for the control group. Figure (3) below clarifies these results:

Figure (3): Discourse errors per 100 words (median)

In order to find out if the differences given in the above figures are sound or not, tests of significance were done using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test for comparisons between groups and the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-ranks test for within-group comparisons of post-test to pre-test results. These tests are appropriate for an analysis of ordinal small samples (cf. Marascuilo and McSweeney, 1977).

Significance tests on the lexical error rates (per 100 words) showed that at pre-test time the experimental group did not differ from the control group (U= 8.00; p= .421). At post-test time, however the experimental group participants made less errors per (100) words than the control group participants did (U= 0.00; p= .004). When comparing pre- to post-test results, the experimental group showed an improvement (Z= -2.02; p= .031) whereas the control group did not (Z= 0.14; p= .500).

Regarding the formal error rates (per 100 words), significance tests indicated that at pre-test time the experimental group did not differ from the control group (U= 7.00; p= .310). At post-test time however, the experimental group participants made less errors per (100) words than the control group participants did (U= 0.00; p= .004). When comparing pre- to post-test results, the experimental group showed an improvement (Z= -2.02; p= .031) whereas the control group did not (Z= -0.94; p= .219).

Turning to discourse error rates, significance tests showed that at pre-test time the experimental group did not differ from the control group participants (U= 7.00; p= .310). The same is also true at post-test time, i.e. any difference between the experimental group and the control group was due to chance (U= 7.00; p= .165). When comparing pre- to post-test results, the experimental group did show an improvement (Z= -2.02; p= .031). In contrast, the control group did not show a significant improvement; however, there was a slight tendency towards improvement (Z= -1.48; p= .094).

2.6 Discussion:

Comparing the pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group through significance tests, it is observed that there is a statistically significant difference. That is, the treatment (the use of model essay based training as a teaching strategy) has a positive effect on improving students' writing in EFL. Such an improvement did not show- or, as with the discourse variable- was less pronounced in the control group. Thus, the three hypotheses of the study have been empirically substantiated.

The results of the first hypothesis reveal a significant decrease in the number of errors committed by students in the experimental group in the post-test as compared to their results of the pre-test. In general, the participants in this group had made use of noticing erroneous lexical aspects, in the model essays they were training on, most frequently among the three major categories of lexis, form, and discourse. This finding goes in line with the study of Qi and Lapkin (2001) which investigates the role of noticing errors and their reformulation as an enriching source for L2 writing. By comparing this study with Qi and Lapkin's, it can be argued that model essays as a teaching strategy can encourage FL learners to notice and reformulate different language aspects. Having FL learners read and notice errors seems to be autonomous in their ability to find their own output errors.

As for the results of the second hypothesis, it is indicated that the experimental group has become more consciously aware of language form. Training students to notice and correct errors they found in model essays has made them pay attention to the linguistic forms they have to produce in EFL writing, i.e. to reflect on their own writings. Moreover, the process of reformulation and self-correction has also provided them with the chance to discuss and explain the errors they have noticed. Through the training session, it is quite clear that the experimental group has tended to pay closer attention to the accurate form of each sentence in the model essay they were reading. They were trying to focus on sentence structure, spelling, verb form, and tense rather than on the other aspects of the written texts. This finding seems to be inconsistent with the results reported by Astika (1993) who showed that students tend to pay more attention to lexical aspects than the other aspects of form and discourse.

Turning to the third hypothesis of the present study, it is obvious that the experimental group had shown an improvement in the discoursal variable as well as the control group which almost did too. This fact is a normal result of participants' success to notice inter-sentential relationships and paragraph structure. This inclination might be a natural result of the training participants have got. Moreover, it seems that the mode of writing has something to offer in relation to noticing issues related to the discourse variable. The use of the descriptive rather than argumentative mode of writing, in this study, provides the suitable means for students to notice

errors of cohesion and coherence successfully, the same way they did in noticing errors related to lexis, and form.

The points discussed so far can be corroborated by some of the data collected during the training session. All the participants in the experimental group were highly motivated to work with model essays. Moreover, they had indicated that model essays were highly beneficial for them; they reported to have learned, through reading model essays, certain conventions, special expressions, how to differentiate between comparative, superlative, and parallel structures, when to use the appropriate tense of the verb, as well as how to select the required information for describing a certain topic.

Moreover, the nature of the material presented in the training session (which is unlike traditional materials) forces students to notice, correct, and reformulate errors. This process of noticing and reformulation provides students with positive, native-like, relevant, in-context and balanced feedback. Another reason for the noticing hypothesis to work successfully lies in the fact that noticing errors motivate and awaken the curiosity of the student by making him take an active role (Qi and Lapkin, 2001; Tocalli-Belle and Swain, 2005).

2.7 Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications:

The findings of this study highlight the positive role of model essays in enabling EFL learners to notice relevant aspects of language. Through reading and training on model essays, learners successfully decreased the number of errors committed in writing their essays. In spite of the fact that learners have achieved a noticeable development in their writing skills in relation to the lexical, form, and discourse aspects of language, the amount of improvement varied between these three categories. The analysis of improvement level reveals that learners' allocated most of their attention to the form of language than to the lexical and discourse categories. Notably, model essays as a teaching strategy represent a chance to engage with instructors in exchanging ideas and noticing errors which is better than leaving learners in a state of ignorance and with little sense of what to do to improve their writing.

As such, the use of model essays should be encouraged in EFL teaching courses. Demonstrably, they are an efficient tool in improving

learners' noticing capacities in addition to drawing their attention to different aspects of FL writing. Moreover, by discussing the errors noticed by FL learners, it seems that some writing problematic areas are difficult to be solved or corrected by learners themselves. This is due to either learners' proficiency level or the type of the writing mode. This amounts to say that model essays should suit the learners' level of proficiency if we want to achieve fruitful results.

2.8 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While the present experiment has provided evidence for the effective use of model essays in developing essay writing, it has certain limitations. As the population from which the sample of participants was drawn comprised EFL students with a specific social, cultural, and educational background, it is not clear to what extent the results can be generalized to a different population. In spite of the rather small sample size, they do, however, generalize to other members of that population.

Also, it is difficult to generalize the results from this study to other cases of FL writing than essay writing. Another limitation concerns the mode of writing used. Building on Schultz's (1991) study, writing is classified into the following modes: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. This study, however, is limited to only the descriptive type of writing. Since the particular writing task can influence what learners' notice in assimilating the FL (Doughty, 1991), the results of the current study may not readily generalize to all different modes of writing. So, further studies are needed to clarify to what extent the results replicate with different tasks, different materials, and different populations.

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استعمال المقالة الأنموذجية في تطوير الكتابة المقالية للطلبة في المرحلة الجامعية

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المستخلص

تم التحقق في البحث الحالي عن اثر استعمال المقالة الأنموذج استراتيجية تعليـم على تطوير كتابة المقالة في اللغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية. وباستعمال تجربـة ذات تصميم الاختبار القبلي والبعدي للمجموعة الضابطة, تم تدريب عشرة طلاب من جامعات عراقية على كتابة المقالة أما باستعمال طرائق التدريس التقليدية أو بإعداد مــن المقـالات الأنموذج المختارة.

وأظهرت النتائج تفوق مجموعة المقالة الأنموذج على المجموعة الـضابطة؛ إذ تمكن الطلبة عن طريق القراءة والتدريب على المقالات الأنموذج من التقليل مــن عـدد الأخطاء المرتكبة في كتابة مقالاتهم فيما يتعلق بالنواحي اللغوية مــن حيـث المفـردات, والشكل, وجوانب الخطاب.