

The Effect of Comprehensive Explicit Instruction Approach on Arab EFL Students' Academic Writing Performance

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Abstract

While recent literature has focused extensively on the widely embraced approach of explicit instruction, there is a considerable paucity of research concerning plausible practical frameworks that can demonstrate how such particular approach is implementable in EFL classes. To address the specific writing deficiencies of EFL students, the current study proposes an innovative, comprehensive, practical framework that derives from Fisher & Frey's explicit instruction approach. As such, an experimental three-stage of pretest-posttest design research took stock of the impact of a modified approach on EFL students' academic writing performance. The research targeted 44 tertiary Arab-Israeli students enrolled in a two-semester academic writing course. The results of the study revealed that the writing performance of the students improved considerably after being exposed to the modified comprehensive explicit instruction program.

Keywords: tertiary education, academic writing, EFL students, comprehensive explicit instruction, academic writing

1. Introduction

When Deirdre DeAngelis, principal of New Dorp (Tyre, 2012), and Carol Jago (2014), past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, thundered out the dictum "writing is taught, not caught," they were probably inspired by an earlier "writing revolution" program developed by Judith Hochman in 1988. Hochman's approach espoused explicit instruction and advocated rigor exercise, rehearsal, and revision. Thenceforth, the impact of such dictum shifted from modeling the hitherto popular line "writing should be caught, not taught" to the more practical antithetical one "writing must be taught not caught."

Applebee and Langer (2013) pointed out that as far as writing was concerned, it was not the "what" that mattered, but rather the "how." This conclusion emanated from a survey conducted in many US schools which revealed that teachers, not students, did most of the writing. In another research carried out two years earlier, the same authors concluded that not much (if ever) changed in a period of one decade: "In 1979–80, the majority of the writing that students completed was writing without composing—short answer or fill in the blank tasks, or copying from the board, where the resulting 'text' was completely structured by the teacher or textbook. Currently that picture looks much the same, with students completing many more pages of exercises and copying than they do of original writing of even a paragraph in length" (Applebee and Langer, 2011, p. 24).

Along these lines, explicit instruction is rooted in the principle of staging the instructor as a director who ushers students toward the learning objectives, delivers the material effectively, and underlines fundamental language rules through effective frameworks and exceptionally organized environment. The productive outcome of this model is that it motivates students to consciously screen cognitive internal procedures of memorization essential for the acquisition of language rules and performance while applying the rules and delivering the final product.

Nonetheless, although the term 'explicit instruction' has been broadly investigated and is increasingly employed in higher education, it is not fully sufficient to handle EFL students' writing difficulties and hence a number of questions regarding this approach remain to be tackled. In this regard, a closer look to the literature, reveals several gaps and shortcomings. First, explicit instruction approach in its present package does not address the specific writing problems encountered by EFL students, and more so EFL minority students who may be bilingual or multilingual such as Arab-Israeli students. Second, much of existing research is unidirectional and descriptive

focusing only on the tripartite model of (I do/you do/we do) and discards the *savoir faire* and the collaborative learning component of peer learning. Third, most of available research is limited to one single skill of language (i.e. reading).

In a bid to meet these concerns, we developed a comprehensive instructional approach that encompasses multiple writing strategies combining different writing genres and pursuing three main features of writing such as language, lexis, and organization. The rationale behind choosing this style of instruction for this undertaking is because, first, it is characterized by solid categorization and bounded knowledge committed to cognitive-behavioral objectives and outcomes. Second, it involves a string of scaffolds that include designing the optimum environment for learning, illustrating both the “what” and the “how” of instruction, and stimulating controlled exercise, autonomous practice, and evaluation.

2. Literature Review

Although explicit instruction can be oftentimes miscomprehended as rote learning (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968), such approach pertains to a process that engages multi-modes of centeredness. That is, it shifts from teacher-centered mode, to student-teacher-centered mode to student-centered mode. Therefore, explicit instruction is associated with long-term memory whereby storing information is attributed to rehearsal. In this sense, explicit instruction, as opposed to rote learning relevant to student and text, encompasses three basic gradual stages. The first is the instructor-centered “I do” stage that entails preparation, direct explanation, and warm-ups. The second is the instructor-student-centered “we do” stage that requires guided practice and necessitates corrective feedback. The third is the student-centered “you do” stage that demands application and self-monitoring (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 35).

Exposure to this particular approach, where students’ understanding and construction of meaning are continuously monitored by the instructor allows students to attain language rules, techniques, vocabulary, and writing skills which are by no means the result of rote learning but rather of practice and rehearsal. In addition, explicit instruction incorporates microlearning units into meaningful macros of contexts enabling students to practice, rehearse, and revise the newly-acquired skills independently and *en masse*.

However, Fisher and Frey (2008), see that such framework of teacher-student interaction *per se* is limited because it discards the collaborative learning component of peer learning which they add to their model composing four stages instead of three: focused instruction (I do), guided instruction (we do), collaborative learning (you do it together), and independent learning (you do). Given that the latter is a valuable component of learning, the current study espouses Fisher & Frey’s explicit instruction approach drawing from its strengths including underpinning the motto “writing must be taught not caught.” Still, this study differs in its holistic framework appealing to EFL students’ writing difficulties.

2.1 EFL Students’ Writing Challenges

No doubt that EFL students arduously and tediously grapple with writing in all stages of education more than native speakers. In the tertiary stage, this task even becomes more challenging as it is assessed more austere and professionally. This situation results from the cultural, schematic, and syntactic disparities between L1 and L2 making the writing task a substantial predicament. Such dilemma can be detected in the students’ insufficient linguistic proficiency, their poor language learning strategies, and their idiomatic, informal and incorrect lexis. In addition, EFL students often struggle at the first juncture of forming ideas because they translate directly from L1 due to the lack of appropriate vocabulary and deficit implementation of grammatical rules.

This research has two goals. First, to verify the validity of the modified comprehensive explicit instruction approach in teaching academic writing to EFL students and, simultaneously to raise EFL students’ awareness to academic writing features through overt error correction and emphasis of L1/L2 dissimilarities. Second, to address the most common errors made by EFL students in the first stage in order to improve their academic writing assessed in the third stage.

2.1.1 The Orthographic System

The considerable difference between the orthographic systems of Arabic and English hinders the writing process significantly. Arabic is a Semitic language with an abjad system that is radically different from the Roman alphabetic system of English. Many researchers maintain that such situation elicits typically obscure and confused writing of EFL learners (Haggan, 1991). Others claim that Arab EFL students’ recurrent spelling errors including capitalization and the use of apostrophe are examples of such discrepancy between both systems. Richards (1974) for example attributes the spelling errors of EFL Arab learners to language interference between L1 and L2 in addition to the lack of practice. Organization, coherence, and punctuation are more elements to be considered.

According to Kaplan (1966), the writing of EFL Arabic-speakers is nonsequential and spasmodic. Likewise, Mahmoud (1982) observes that EFL Arab learners' writing is restricted, invariant, inarticulate, and arbitrary. Hinkel (1997) similarly maintains that EFL students' writing is equivocal and repetitive as a result of the orthographical divergence and diverse morphology and phonology of both English and Arabic. Despite the fact that such divergence between both orthographical systems *does* produce a number of obstacles, the current study claims that these obstacles can be overcome.

2.1.2 Grammar

There is no universal or fixed definition for grammar. Kolln (1981) points out that grammar is "the internalized system that native speakers of a language share" (p. 140). In a wide-ranging, longitudinal study conducted between the years 1980-1998, Norris and Ortega (2000) maintain that L2 explicit instruction of grammar has proved to be more effective and more long-lasting compared to implicit instruction. In another holistic longitudinal study, Spada and Tomita (2010) indicate that explicit instruction is more enduring than implicit instruction and that it is more effective concerning simple language features as well as complex ones.

2.1.3 Lexis

Young-Davy (2014) affirms the significance of lexis for producing a good piece of writing: "vocabulary learning must be upfront and center stage in writing instruction" (26). She further argues that upgraded and bettered vocabulary enhances learners' feeling of achievement while poor vocabulary cripples their efforts and impairs even the most assiduous and sedulous students. Generally speaking, vocabulary is a collocation that includes words, idioms, set and variable phrases, and phrasal verbs (Folse, 2004). The keyword for learning vocabulary effectively is exposure and, in this case, the frequency of exposure should be doubly underlined. McKeown, Beck, Omanson, and Pople (1985) argue that students learn a word thoroughly and even use it in their oral and written language after 12 encounters with the word. Anderson and Nagy (1993) claim that "research on vocabulary growth suggests that the average student learns from 2000 to 3000 words per year, and that many students learn at twice that rate" (p.1). Likewise, Meara, Lightbown, & Halter (1997) maintain that students are exposed only to 2.75 new words from 500 words of speech. However, they add, in order to enhance vocabulary, the exposure by itself is not enough as it should be associated with a high-frequency vocabulary. Many other researchers assert the necessity of exposure, repetition, and recycling in different rates (Anderson & Nagy, 1984; Baddeley 1990; Nation 2001; Kamil, 2004; and De Groot, 2006).

In the same vein, Graves (2006) points out that explicit teaching of vocabulary is requisite and can be demonstrated by developing students' word consciousness and teaching selected individual words, vocabulary-learning techniques, key-words, and root-words. Likewise, Coady, Magoto, Hubbard, Graney, and Mokhtari (1993) argue that explicit instruction of vocabulary affects ESL reading comprehension positively. In addition, Hunt and Beglar (2005) claim that "teachers should provide systematic, explicit vocabulary instruction directed at the expansion, consolidation, and elaboration of their learners' lexicons" (28). Similarly, Hinkel (2002) advocates explicit instruction of vocabulary since it improves the lexical proficiency of all learners no matter their level. Since acquiring lexis necessitates repetitive manifestation and should be packed with recurrent exposure, explicit guided instruction of vocabulary is recommended since it is fundamental to the "systematic development of L2 vocabulary" (177).

2.1.4 Cultural Differences

The main differences between Arabic speaking-cultures and English-speaking cultures are underlined by Zaharna (1995) who argues that Arabic is a high-context language that hinges on implicit interaction and gestural nonverbal signs. She claims that, to a large extent, high-context interaction discards background information and documentation. In addition, the nature of Arabic as an oral language makes it subjective, emotional, vague, repetitive, and society-oriented. In contrast, English is a print language complements pragmatism, incrementality, individuality, objectivity and linearity. More, English as a literate language necessitates beginnings, endings, and documentation in writing.

Although the opponents of such philosophy, comparing Arabic to English, claim that "the two theories are more similar than different" (Al-Hindawi & Ghayadh, 2016, p. 1). In this research and based on the collected data we found more validity in the assumptions that underline the effect of cultural differences on learning English than those that do not. In this regard, Griefat & Katriel (1989) underline the difference between English and Arabic in the aspect of "musayara" that characterizes the latter. They refer to this term as a conciliatory attitude of the "individual's effort to maintain harmony in social relations" (121). We add that there is yet another expression that is deeply rooted in the Arab culture called "mujamala." Mujamala literally means to beautify or aestheticize words and demeanor. Although both terms are oftentimes used interchangeably, mujamala is different from musayara.

While the latter entails meekness and compliance and triggers feelings of angst and dishonesty, the former denotes voluntarism and enthusiasm. Lustig and Koester (2010) emphasize the differences between Arabic and English languages in ways of persuasion and argumentation: “cultural patterns supply the underlying assumptions that people within a culture use to determine what is ‘correct’ and reasonable, and they therefore provide the persuader’s justification for linking the evidence to the conclusions desired from the audience. (p. 231). Obviously, this assumption holds for some but not necessarily for everyone in the Arab culture.

2.1.5 Plagiarism

Many EFL students, particularly those whose cultures embrace rote learning rather than constructivist, heuristic learning, lack the skills of critical thinking, essay writing, and documentation. Many language experts agree that, among other reasons, the concept of plagiarism is associated with different cultural backgrounds (Grunebaum, 1944; Handra & Power, 2005; Sowden, 2005; Ha, 2006; Leask, 2006; Click, 2012). These claims seem somewhat stereotypical because they do not investigate native speakers’ plagiarism.

A relatively longstanding study on plagiarism demonstrates that compared to the Western world, the concept of documentation and acknowledgement of sources is perceived differently in the Arab world: “the Arabic concept of originality, and hence the concept of plagiarism as well, do not coincide with those that have been current in the West for the last three or four centuries” and that “the most casual observation will show how heavily later poets depend on their predecessors, it is an easy task, frequently undertaken by Arabs themselves, to trace genealogy of many a characteristic verse; and it may sometimes appear to us that everybody copied everybody and that literary theft was universally practiced and condoned” (Grunebaum, 1944, p. 234). A more recent study points out that EFL students “often grapple with issues of academic integrity, and plagiarism in particular” as handling academic integrity may be more challenging for international students (Click, 2012, p. 44). Likewise, Handra & Power (2005) maintain that students’ different cultural background and educational training, particularly those advocating rote-learning, make these students “persistent plagiarizers” (p.2). This expression echoes an earlier one utilized by Deckert (1993) who claimed that international students “in settings of higher education are frequently viewed by Western instructors as persistent plagiarizers.” (1993, p. 131).

Nonetheless, Tyre (2001) points out that, according to research, more than 70 percent of U.S. college students plagiarize writing assignments. This finding indicates that plagiarism is a universal problem amongst students and that not all international students are natural plagiarists. Hence, it is unfair to use the expression “persistent plagiarizers” to refer to international students in the absence of concrete evidence or research that compares international students with English native speakers.

2.1.6 EFL Students’ Critical Thinking Skills

Carrying out linguistically-demanding tasks, such as essay writing, is no easy task even for native speakers of English. Cultural difference is perhaps the most prominent hindrance to critical thinking. Kaplan and Ramanathan (1996) point out that in most cases EFL students lack the critical thinking skills due to cultural obstructions. Hence, Arabic is a high-context language that is associated with rote-learning (Graham, 1987; Cook, 1999; Rugh, 2002), that is “not especially conducive to critical thinking” (AHDR 2003, p.51).

3. Arab-Israeli EFL Students

In addition to the previously mentioned challenges that EFL students in general encounter in their writing tasks, in the Arab stream in Israel, other constraints that hamper students’ learning such as lack of facilities and overcrowded classes are to be considered (Detel, 2014). According to OECD Economic Surveys (2018) the most overcrowded classes in Israel are found in the Arab sector. In addition, poverty of the Arab sector in Israel adds up to these constraints. According to (Yashiv & Kasir 2018) there are fundamental discrepancies between the Jewish and the Arab sectors in Israel in terms of economic welfare and employment for various reasons such as discrimination, deficit transportation, and weakness of the Arab local authorities which account for difficulties of access to employment opportunities in the Israeli labor market.

In light of the above-mentioned reasons, EFL students, including Arab-Israeli students, lack the intellectual vigor essential for creating a flawless piece of writing. As a result of such deficiencies, EFL students’ writing may entail insubstantial, shallow, and suggestive train of thoughts as they rely much on emotions (Al-Khatib, 1994), repetition, and hyperbole (South & Newsome, 2017) rather than on cognitive and rational argumentation.

However, some of these problems can be tackled by explicit instruction. Unlike high-context cultures, low-context cultures adopt Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) derived from Bloom’s taxonomy and associated with critical thinking skills that involve accuracy, logic, documentation, precision, complexity, and explicitness. Based on field studies that critical thinking can be taught, the Ministry of Education in Israel made fundamental changes in the

literature program taught for high school students in 2010 according to which “HOTS should be taught explicitly and activities should be included that allow for learners to apply these HOTS to their lives” (Revised Curriculum, 2013, p.51). Accordingly, English teachers nationwide enrolled in the Ministry’s informative courses so as to integrate HOTS in the program.

4. The Comprehensive Explicit Instruction Program

This comprehensive approach stems from Fisher & Frey’s 2008 model of gradual release of responsibility which is premised on various theories. The first is cognitive development and schemata which Piaget (1952) dedicates to six stages of intellectual development. The second is Bandura’s social learning theory that reinforces social modeling as an educational tool. His theory entails three processes: “attentional, organizational, and rehearsal” (1971, p.9). The third is Vygotsky’s work on zones of proximal development. He maintains that developing knowledge of students is possible by a skillful teacher, scaffolding and supportive activities, and social interaction. The fourth is Wood’s, Bruner’s, and Ross’s (1976) work on scaffolded instruction based on the nature of the tutorial process through a three-dimensional structure where data are provided by the changing interaction of tutor and learners.

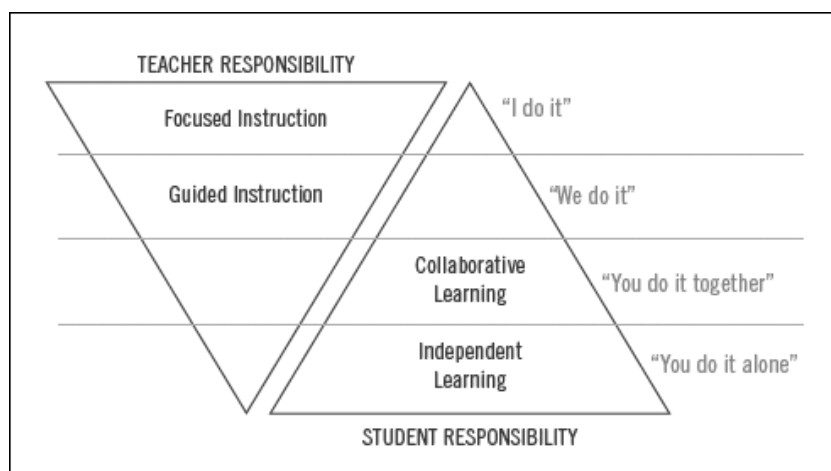


Figure 1. Fisher & Frey’s Gradual Release of Responsibility Instructional Framework

The proposed approach incorporates many components that enhance writing skills by heightening other skills such as reading, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary. Hence, this research goes beyond merely illustrating features of writing or offering instructional approaches that may boost students’ writing performance. It rather suggests ways to improve students’ deficient skills while employing a multi-stage program that boosts their cognitive knowledge regarding structural strategies of written texts and heightens their awareness to lexis and grammar. We believe that when students become attentive to the appropriate use of grammatical rules, choice of words and the different features of text types, they perform better in writing.

5. Methodology

This research employed methodological triangulation using a three-stage of pretest-posttest design: two rating scales to assess tests in the first and the third stages, in addition to using existing knowledge base for further analysis.

5.1 Participants

A total of 44 EFL Arab juniors enrolled in an English teacher preparation program were recruited from one college of education in Israel. To avoid the classical HALO and Hawthorne, out of 47 students, 44 students signed an informed consent to voluntarily participate in the research.

5.2 Research Design and Tools

This is a multiphase, qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research study that encompasses three stages: the pre-test stage, the experiment stage, and the post-test stage. The research employed two rating scales used as correction methods. We developed these rating scales depending on our expertise in the field. One rating scale was a quantitative descriptive instrument used to collect data (number of errors) from the students’ writing samples, while the other rating scale was a qualitative generic assessment tool which entailed a nominal level of measurement illustrating features of academic writing and was applied to analyze the errors related to the logical flow of the essays. The first tool contained five basic criteria (formality, sentence structure, grammar, mechanics,

and lexis) divided into 22 sub-criteria. The sub-criteria included errors of words and lexis, verb tense, punctuation, capitalization, language, vague sentences, fragments, spelling, articles, pronouns, contractions, word order, cohesion, run-ons, parallelism, apostrophe, passive voice. The second tool was a Likert-like five-point scale that determined the level of students' writing. This tool comprised five criteria: objectivity, responsibility, organization, explicitness, complexity. For example, responsibility as well as the other criteria were measured according to five points: the student always, often, sometimes, hardly, or never acknowledged the sources.

5.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

To investigate the effects of the comprehensive explicit program on Arab-Israeli EFL academic writing, the following research questions were addressed:

Question 1: What is the effect of the comprehensive explicit program on the writing performance of Israeli-Arab students?

Question 2: Are there differences in error rates made in writing before and after implementing the writing program?

The hypotheses stemming from these questions are:

Hypothesis 1: The comprehensive explicit program is expected to be effective and the students are less likely to make errors in all categories.

Hypothesis 2: After implementing the writing program, it is expected that the error rate will decline.

6. The Research

6.1 Pre-test

In the first stage, students' writing was tested. At the beginning of their first academic writing course, the students were required to write a 300-word source-based argumentative essay. The rationale for choosing source-based writing is because responsibility and citing source materials as well as paraphrasing are part and parcel of academic writing and prerequisites for academic originality and integrity. Therefore, the students were provided with four academic sources. The test lasted two hours and was followed by a thorough assessment of students' writing performance and the writing errors drawn from this test were listed in accordance with their type and frequency (Chaleila & Garra-Alloush, 2019). That is, accuracy of students' writing was measured by using an error analysis. This group was regarded as the control group.

6.2 Intervention

Based on the results of the first stage, we built a new framework that mimics Fisher & Frey's gradual release of responsibility instructional framework. Yet, in each stage, including the last one that mandated responsibility, we monitored this responsibility in order to guarantee that students learning was effective. In addition, in the collaborative learning stage, we added the "practice" component so as to maintain students' understanding and accurate application of theory. After collaborative learning and independent learning, we monitored both preliminary and the final written tasks by using individual and collaborative corrective methods where we corrected respectively each task and then when the final task was completed, we engaged the students in the correction process following seven steps:

- I do it: Focused Instruction and Modeling (Teacher Responsibility)
- I do it: Guided Instruction and Modeling (Teacher Responsibility)
- You do it together: Collaborative Learning and Practice (Student Responsibility)
- I "correct" it: Preliminary Product (Teacher Responsibility)
- You do it alone: Independent Learning (Student Responsibility)
- We "correct" it together: Final Product (Teacher and Student Responsibility)
- You do it again: Final Product (Student Responsibility)

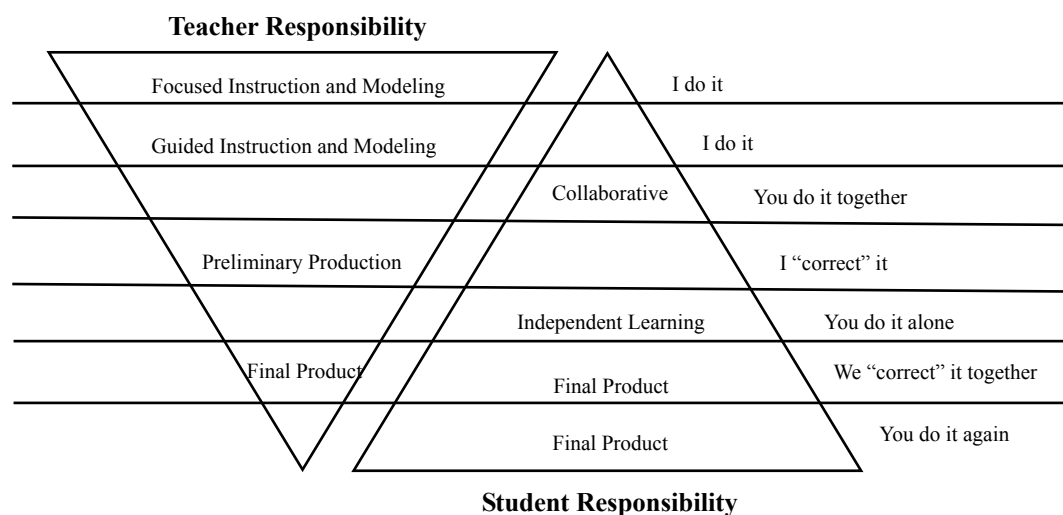


Figure 2.

6.3 The Process

In the second stage of a twenty-eight-week treatment condition, the same sample population of the first stage (control group) was exposed to the comprehensive multidimensional explicit instruction program and experienced explicit intervention on a weekly basis. The students explicitly learned and intensively and minutely practiced elements of academic writing including structure, formality, precision, caution, accuracy, objectivity and explicitness in addition to grammar, lexis, and mechanics. Based on the results of the first stage, the most frequent errors were made in grammar and lexis, therefore, an additional focus on multiple grammatical and lexical aspects was necessary such as explicit instruction of grammar and vocabulary acquisition.

At the outset, the instructional goals and outcomes of each lecture and their significance were explicitly stated, followed by a description of the material to be taught. To avoid misinterpretation during the process, we utilized explicit and decided terminology. The instruction was on content knowledge as the students were taught reading and writing skills, learning strategies, vocabulary terms, and grammatical rules. This was done in a step-wise subsequent fashion and was modeled and demonstrated clearly. In addition, the easier skills (present simple; simple sentences) were taught before the harder ones (future perfect; complex sentences) and more common skills (punctuation) before less common ones (formality). The new complex skills were chunked into smaller instructional units providing sufficient variety of examples and non-examples. That is, we demonstrated how the skills were used correctly (compound and complex sentences) and how they were used incorrectly (fragments, run-ons). Once grasped, these units were merged into bigger, more intricate ones. At each stage, following the second one, we "corrected" the errors of each student, and later, listed these errors and engaged the students in the "correction" process. We exploited the proposed comprehensive explicit instruction approach to tackle the following most prominent challenges:

6.3.1 Inadequate Practice

Apparently, the students did not seem to have experienced sufficient practice needed for the implementation of the newly acquired skills. Our first impression was that although most students knew the theories, they lacked the praxis. That is, although they *did* recognize most of the material they were taught in this program, they were oftentimes incapable of giving concrete examples of theories in practice. Hence, their unproficiency could be ascribed to inadequate practice. To determine students' attentiveness, understanding, and mastery of the skills, each skill was guided and practiced through distributed (one verb tense at a time) and massed exercises (writing a paragraph using all verbs) that ranged from the easiest to the most complex. Responses to the tasks were done both verbally and in writing, individually and in groups. We gave timely and immediate corrective responses to minimize errors and elevate the rates of success. To guarantee that the students internalized the material, they were also given different kinds of homework: practice (underpin newly acquired skills), preparation (prepare and organize material for classwork), and extension (long-lasting assignments corresponding to classwork such as participation in college conferences), (Rosário et al., 2015).

6.3.2 The Orthographic System

The results of the first stage showed that students made substantial errors in this category. That is, most of the written samples did not adhere to the organization tenets. We also noticed that the students did not pay much attention to coherence. Most written samples lacked a beginning, body, and conclusion. This could be ascribed to the fact that in Arabic one long sentence may form an entire paragraph, and punctuation has no strict rules compared to English. In other words, in Arabic it is acceptable and rather recommended to write very long sentences that might constitute a whole long paragraph using only comas. In addition, repetition which is a favorable feature in Arabic is utilized as a means of persuasion (high-context) in contrast to English which demands concise and explicit sentences. There were many run-on and vague sentences into the bargain, not to mention that many samples ignored source documentation. This situation elicited severe cases of plagiarism. To tackle the punctuation hindrance, the students were exposed to explicit instruction of punctuation rules and documentation in English (APA, MLA). More, they were explicitly taught different organizational structures of academic writing that included opening, body, and conclusion along with the utilization of appropriate transitional words and expressions such as addition and opposition, cause and effect, conclusion and summary, sequence and chronology.

6.3.3 Spelling

The results drawn from the first stage revealed that students made many spelling errors. Hence, there was a need to teach spelling conventions explicitly because severely misspelled words would cause misunderstanding the message of the written content. Spelling errors made by Arabic-speaking students resulted from the discrepancy between the orthographic systems of Arabic and English. The Arabic language lacks short vowels and uses nunation instead. To add, because Arabic lacks the tribute of capitalization as all letters are treated equally no matter their location in the sentence, many students did not use capitalization or misused it. The most popular spelling errors in the writing samples were leaving out vowels and confusion in using the letters p-b, c-k, and g-j. Such confusion occurred because of the different pronunciation in both languages: Arabic lacks the letter “P,” so students usually confuse it with “B.” Furthermore, in Arabic the word is written as pronounced while in English the situation is different (i.e. queue).

In response to these particular deficiencies, we advocated raising students’ phonological, orthographic and morphological awareness by teaching them several orthographic conventions explicitly adopting McNeill’s approach (2018). According to this approach, to improve spelling performance, three metalinguistic abilities of students should be enhanced: phonological awareness (knowledge of the sound structure which was implemented by using “speaking dictionaries”), orthographic awareness (encoding sounds to symbols or to writing the graphemes of various phonemes which was applied by teaching multiple spelling rules), and morphological awareness (knowledge of a word’s internal structure and meaningful parts such as affixes and roots).

6.3.4 Grammar

Due to the substantial number of errors made in grammar, the students were taught rule-oriented grammar intensely. Among the popular errors made by the students was excluding the “be” form. The reason for this is that in English every sentence must have a verb either action or non-action. Upon translation from L2 to L1, the “be” tense is untranslatable. Namely, in Arabic when the subject is the topic, the sentence is called a nominal sentence and nominal sentences lack verbs. Therefore, it was common for some students to leave out verb “to be” in the present form and hence, errors like “the man tall” were common. Another recurrent error in this category was ruling out the auxiliary in compound verbs such as “David going” instead of “David is going.” Based on this reality, the students were exposed to all sentence types, verb tenses, verb types. This step was essential to avoid any possible grammar errors. However, two more crucial measures were taken to make this happen: students were taught main sentence types (simple, compound, complex) and sentence problems (run-on, fragment, dangling modifiers). Then they were asked to practice each verb type by writing a small paragraph using only one specific verb tense (i.e. past simple). Later students were asked to write paragraphs using mixed verbs. To minimize the quandary of sentence structure, the students intensively practiced sentence problems. Grammatical reading was also another strategy we used to enhance students’ grammatical skills. The students were given different texts whereby they had to determine sentence types, parts of speech, and verb types and tenses.

The main goal of this section was to help students internalize the basics of English grammar, develop composing strategies to write essays that enhance ideas and support opinions. As the focus was on grammatical structures such as noun, adverbial and adjective clauses, in addition to conditionals and subjunctive forms, the students were able to master these attributes and hence delivered more sophisticated, effective, and grammatically correct writing. Students learned to write formal essays in different academic modes including narration, argumentation, cause and

effect, and comparison. They were also exposed to aspects of stylistics such as word choice and sentence variety. Students responded to in-class assigned readings and wrote documented essays.

6.3.5 Lexis

We dedicated part of the lecture time slot to explicit vocabulary instruction while verifying the students' familiarity with the vocabulary to be used in reading or writing in order to alleviate their reading and writing skills. In this case the internet was an effective tool utilized as a provider of multi-leveled and multi-themed tasks including online exercises such as sentence error correction, punctuation, spelling. Moreover, we explained the significance of reading in promoting both vocabulary and writing. Consequently, the students were exposed to a broad range of reading as they were asked to read a wide load of books. The next assignment was that the students discussed the books orally and in writing. Later, the students were provided with high-quality words chosen from each book to use in writing.

We modeled each task on the board according to which the students shared their writing tasks while the others corrected. Students were also asked to read their essays aloud and we asked questions about specific words, their usage, synonyms and antonyms. This process enhanced students' comprehension as they learned and applied new vocabulary both in their oral and writing tasks. In addition, learning many new words helped them recognize unfamiliar words with common stems (i.e. root words) via using prior knowledge and sometimes word predictions (prefixes and suffixes). Repetition was another element we emphasized. That is, using the same words in multiple contexts such as writing, reading and speaking and in different genres including literature and poetry helped students establish a profound knowledge in vocabulary and hence boosted their control of this new-earned knowledge. This step was imperative as students were able to use appropriate lexis in proofreading, drafting, rewriting, synthesizing, paraphrasing, summarizing, annotating, editing essays, in addition to different style citations.

However, reading is not enough to phonemic awareness if it lacks the appropriate pronunciation. Therefore, students were asked to successively check their spelling using online speaking dictionaries which provided pronunciation along with possible meanings.

6.3.6 Critical Thinking

This obstacle was approached by teaching HOTS explicitly. In addition, the students underwent an intensive exposure to massed and distributed practice of HOTS including comparing and contrasting, distinguishing different perspectives, explaining cause and effect, explaining patterns, inferring, and predicting. The students were also provided with a list of vocabulary necessary for these HOTS. Throughout the process, the students were given detailed and immediate exercises enveloped with intensive practice to every theory and rule taught in class.

6.4 Posttest

In the third stage, the experimental group were required to write a source-based 300-word essay that lasted two hours. The students' writing skills were retested and reassessed by the same research tools, and data from both stages were collected and compared successively. The tests were taken by the same population sample in order to assess the validity of the explicit instruction approach carried out in class.

7. Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the descriptive data, means and standard deviations, for the results obtained from the administration of the qualitative generic tool in the first stage. According to this assessment tool, most recurrent errors were in complexity and explicitness while the least recurrent error was in objectivity. This tool revealed that 75% of the students' written samples rated poor.

Table 1.

| <i>Characteristics</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Minimum</i> | <i>Maximum</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Std. Deviation</i> |
|------------------------|----------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Objectivity | 44 | 1.00 | 3.00 | 1.78 | .51 |
| Responsibility | 44 | 1.00 | 3.00 | 2.20 | .63 |
| Organization | 44 | 1.40 | 3.00 | 2.28 | .45 |
| Explicitness | 44 | 1.50 | 3.00 | 2.42 | .51 |
| Complexity | 44 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 2.70 | .46 |
| Total | 44 | 1.36 | 3.00 | 2.25 | .42 |

Table 2 provides a summary of the descriptive data -means and standard deviations- for the scores obtained from the administration of the generic tool in the third stage. Results and analyses of errors in the written samples revealed that students made fewer errors in both rating scales. In the generic writing performance scale, the most recurrent errors were in complexity and responsibility while the least recurrent error was in objectivity and the error mean was 50% according to students' written samples.

Table 2.

| <i>Characteristics</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Minimum</i> | <i>Maximum</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Std. Deviation</i> |
|------------------------|----------|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Objectivity | 44 | 1.00 | 3.00 | 1.056 | 0.51 |
| Organization | 44 | 1.00 | 3.00 | 1.142 | 0.49 |
| Explicitness | 44 | 1.40 | 3.00 | 1.204 | 0.40 |
| Responsibility | 44 | 1.50 | 3.00 | 1.295 | 0.46 |
| Complexity | 44 | 2.00 | 3.00 | 2.70 | 0.46 |
| Total | 44 | 1.36 | 3.00 | 1.5 | 0.66 |

Table 3 shows that the students made 2965 errors in the first stage, while their written samples in the third stage revealed a substantial improvement of 76% as they made 729 errors, a sharp drop to 24% compared to the errors made in the first stage. In the first stage the most recurrent errors were in lexis and mechanics (spelling mistakes, capitalization errors and punctuation), while the least recurrent ones were in formality. In the third stage, it is obvious that students' written performance improved substantially as they made fewer errors according to the error frequency rating scale after being exposed to the comprehensive explicit instruction program.

Table 3. The error frequency rating scale: Comparison

| <i>Writing Errors</i> | <i>Pre-Approach Test Results</i> | <i>Post-Approach Test Results</i> |
|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Use of wrong words | 8.0909 | 1.659 |
| Use of poor lexis/repetition. | 6.2273 | 0.3636 |
| Incorrect verb tense/no verb | 5.9318 | 2.4545 |
| Punctuation | 5.0227 | 1 |
| Use of informal, slang and idioms. | 4.3864 | 1.1363 |
| Spelling mistakes | 3.8182 | 1.8181 |
| Incorrect subject-verb agreement | 3.2955 | 1.909 |
| Vague and incomplete sentences. | 3.1136 | 0.3181 |
| Capitalization errors | 3.0909 | 1.1818 |
| Incorrect use of articles/lack of articles | 3.0682 | 1.159 |
| Use of fragments | 3.0227 | 0.1363 |
| Indefinite pronouns (without clear antecedent) | 2.3182 | 0.4318 |
| Incorrect word order | 2.1591 | 0.659 |
| Use of contractions. | 2.1591 | 0.159 |
| Incorrect use of prepositions | 2.0909 | 0.9772 |
| Sentences are not related to the preceding ones | 2.0682 | 0.25 |
| Use of run-ons | 1.6818 | 0.3409 |
| Lack of parallelism in a series of items | 1.6512 | 0.1136 |
| Incorrect use of apostrophe | 1.4091 | 0.4318 |
| Use of directives addressing the reader. | 1.1364 | 0.0681 |
| Inappropriate use of passive voice | 1.1364 | 0 |
| Use of numbered lists and bulleted items | 0.5455 | 0 |

8. Discussion

The first research question of the present study probed the effectiveness and the validity of the comprehensive explicit instruction while the second examined the errors rates in both stages, before and after implementing the program. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the results presented in this paper and which pertain to both research hypotheses. According to the qualitative generic tool, in the first and the third stages students' most frequent error made was in complexity, surprisingly scoring the same results (mean=2.7). Being exposed to various HOTS in order to elevate their critical thinking, the students critical thinking skills improved in many features such as documentation, precision, and explicitness but not in the complexity feature. Hence, this result is only partially in line with that of Kaplan and Ramanathan (1996) and others, who attribute the errors made by EFL students in these features to the lack the critical thinking skills associated with cultural obstructions.

In the first stage the results were as follows, in descending order: explicitness (mean=2.42), organization (mean=2.28), responsibility (mean=2.20), and objectivity (mean=1.78). In the second stage the students' writing performance improved considerably in all features, in descending order: responsibility (mean=1.295), explicitness (mean=1.204), organization (mean=1.142), and objectivity (mean=1.056). Hence, there was a dramatic improvement in all features of academic writing (except for complexity). Although the responsibility feature which was in the fourth place in the first stage moved to the second place in the third stage, it should be noted that the error mean in the third stage is lower than that in the first stage. It also indicates that students performed less effectively in this criterion than the other criteria in the third stage. Explicitness was still followed by organization in terms of order and objectivity was the least frequent error in both stages.

In the quantitative rating scales, the post-approach test results show a substantial improvement in all criteria (Table 3). For instance, both "inappropriate use of passive voice" and "use of numbered lists and bulleted items" were fully mastered by the students in the third stage and no errors were detected in both criteria. Whereas the most common errors in the first stage, in descending order were in lexis (use of wrong words [mean=8.0909] and use of poor lexis/repetition [mean=6.2273]), and grammar ([particularly] use of incorrect verb tense/no verb [mean=5.9318]). The number of these errors dropped substantially in the third stage (with use of wrong words [mean=1.659], use of poor lexis/repetition [mean=0.3636], and incorrect verb tense/no verb [mean=2.4545]).

These results demonstrate that despite the fact that many scholars lean heavily on the claim that EFL students in general and Arab students in particular lack critical thinking skills and other essential skills needed for academic writing, such skills can be taught in due time if addressed appropriately and patiently.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

This research work represents a step forward in using an effective approach in teaching academic writing for EFL students. However, building upon the findings of this research, we agree that more steps need to be implemented to enhance students' academic writing performance.

First, the assessment tools employed in the study, though offering a starting point in analyzing academic writing features, lacked the tribute of individuality. That is, we were more concerned with tracing the most frequent errors made by all the students rather those made by each student. In addition, although we evaluated the writing tests individually, the results were amalgamated without paying special attention whether some students did or did not improve and to what extent they improved had their results been analyzed individually. Still, such process is not easy as it requires a long time providing the relatively short time given for this experiment (twenty-eight weeks).

Second, the assessment tools do not adequately nor directly address the issue of "orthographic system"—a major factor in determining the level of critical thinking and as this factor is the most problematic to handle. There is a need for a separate research to investigate how this factor can be overcome more effectively particularly in the case of EFL students.

To conclude, by questioning the prevailing pedagogical orthodoxy of teaching writing courses in EFL classes, this research proposed an alternative instruction approach based on explicit teaching. The findings of this research impart substantial empirical evidence pertaining to academic writing in teacher education. They demonstrate that the proposed program was considerably effective as the EFL students' academic writing skills improved substantially through the instrumentality of scaffolding, corrective process, and practice which aided in harnessing the pitfalls associated with cultural and systematic discrepancies between L1 and L2. Finally, we believe that the proposed approach provides a constructive solution to EFL students' writing deficiencies and can be used as an effective platform in EFL classrooms.

Disclaimer

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