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The Effects of Training in Learning Strategies of Writing in Improving Student's writing Skills: Hawassa University Students in Focus

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Abstract

This research was mainly an experimental study intended to examine the effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. To this end, the selected freshman program students of Hawassa University were randomly assigned to the experimental and the control groups. Students in the experimental group were taught lessons of the 'Basic Writing Skills' course with training in the learning strategies of writing, whereas those in the control group were taught the lessons without training in the learning strategies of writing.

Data were collected mainly through writing skills tests. Independent-Samples T Test which was computed for the pre-test revealed that the students who were assigned to the experimental and the control groups had similar writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics (t-values < 1.56, p-values > .122). The Independent-Samples T Test computed for the post-test, however, demonstrated that the students in the experimental group significantly outperformed the students in the control group on each of the aspects of writing (t-values > 2.50, p-values < .014). As revealed through the interview held with selected students of the experimental group, students in this group could significantly surpass students in the control group because the training benefited the students in the experimental group to learn the role of the strategies to improve their writing skills and it improved their belief about taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing, and thus they continued to use the strategies appropriately when they carried out writing tasks in and outside class.

Based on the findings, a recommendation has been made that writing tasks/activities should be introduced in the context of training in the learning strategies of writing. As a result, students could improve their writing skills by using the strategies appropriately and by taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing. Moreover, it has been recommended that studies could be conducted on other issues as to training in the learning strategies of writing.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Hawassa University is a public university found in the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State of Ethiopia. According to the University official website,

the mission of the University is to advance knowledge, enhance technology creation and transfer, promote effective entrepreneurship, and inculcate a responsible and democratic attitude through training, research, and public services; thereby, contributing to the development of the nation. The vision of the University is to be the best University in the nation, competent in Africa and internationally accredited by 2017/18.

Hawassa University is a comprehensive University engaged in the provision of all-round education, research, training, and community service. The University has 64 first degree programs, 43 second degree programs and 4 PhD programs in various schools/colleges: Natural and Computational Sciences, Medical and Health Sciences, Business and Economics, Governance and Development Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities, Technology and Informatics, Agriculture, and Forestry and Natural Resources. Currently, the University has more than twenty-two thousand students who are studying various disciplines for the aforementioned degrees.

Students of all departments of Hawassa University, as is the case with students of other universities across the nation, particularly in the first year of the undergraduate studies, take English language courses such as Communicative English Skills I, Communicative English Skills II, English for Secondary Schools Teaching and Learning, Sophomore English, Basic Writing Skills, Advanced Writing I, Advanced Writing II, and/or Report Writing. The main objective of offering the English language courses to the students is to help them improve their proficiency because English is a medium of instruction and nearly all the teaching/learning and reference materials are written in it (Gebremedhin, 1986; Hailemichael, 1993). Moreover, the University has English programs that train students for a bachelor's degree and for a master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The written as well as oral communications and meetings within the University, usually, and communications with foreign learning institutions, always, are carried out in English. Moreover, formal as well as informal notices of the University usually appear in English. A great deal of information exchange, thus, takes place mainly in writing. It is also mainly writing that has been offered to the undergraduate program students of all departments of the University.

The University curricula, however, have not given room for the issue of training in the learning strategies of English language in

general and writing skills in particular. Training in the learning strategies of writing involves asking students to learn writing by receiving training on the strategies wherein explanations are given to the students as to when, how and why the strategies can be used (Oxford, 1990). Learning writing lessons in this way improves students' writing skills. This is because training benefits students to learn the role of the strategies to improve their writing skills and it improves their motivation to learn writing and their belief about taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing, and thus they continue to use the strategies appropriately when they carry out writing tasks in and outside class (Oxford, 1990; Ze-sheng, 2008; Liang, 2009; McMullen, 2009).

"Student writing is at the center of teaching and learning in higher education, fulfilling a range of purposes according to the various contexts in which it occurs" (Coffin et al., 2003:2). In higher education, it is mainly writing that is used as a means to assess students. That is, instructors ask students to write paragraphs or essays in or outside class as well as make students take written examinations and write laboratory reports in order to evaluate students' achievement of course objectives. Thus, students' success usually depends on their writing skills. In

relation to this idea, McWhorter (1996: 357) says, "As a general rule, the further you progress in your education, the more writing you will be expected to do." Moreover, writing at tertiary education is used to facilitate learning. That is to say, instructors encourage students to facilitate their learning by writing diaries, questions, problems, and suggestions on the process of teaching/learning and then sharing these with someone else (instructors, peers, or others). This may increase their reasoning and critique skills and, thus, improves their learning.

Statement of the Problem

The present researcher's experience in teaching and advising (students with their senior essays) at Hawassa University shows that the writing performance of the majority of students is deteriorating alarmingly. At conferences and workshops conducted on issues related to English language teaching in general and writing skills teaching in particular, many instructors from other universities of the country have also reflected that their students too seem to have a great difficulty in writing intelligibly and effectively. This is observed in tests/examinations, assignments and senior essay papers. The students are poor at discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate

grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. In relation to this, Italo (1999) says that, as he offers the English language courses to the freshman program students at Addis Ababa University, he has observed that the students seem to have serious problems in writing in English. This corresponds with Geremew's (1999) findings concerning students of the same University.

The literature widely discusses that the method we use to teach writing is a key factor that determines students' writing skills. In relation to this idea, Westwood (2008:4) says, "…ineffective educational practices (i.e., teaching methods) contribute to children's difficulty in learning to read and write. More recently, the teaching approach as a major causal factor has been strongly confirmed." Scholars abroad have continued to conduct studies to search for instructional methods that can bring significant improvements on students' writing skills. Thus, studying the effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills has attracted the attention of many scholars.

Gamelin (1996) found that Grade 7 students of Surrey - British Colombia who learned compare/contrast essays through receiving training on the cognitive learning strategies of writing outperformed their peers who did not learn in this way. McMullen (2009) found that

receiving training on the learning strategies of writing helped Saudi University freshman English composition learners improve their writing skills. Moreover, Lv and Chen (2010) discovered that students who were taught writing through training in the meta-cognitive learning strategies of writing in Laiwu Vocational College, China significantly improved their writing skills compared with their peers who were not taught writing in this way. Furthermore, Rajak (2004) found that the ESL learners of the Selangor State, Malaysia who were made to practice writing by receiving training on the learning strategies of writing performed better.

As far as the present researcher's knowledge is concerned, so far, no piece of local study has been conducted at any level of learning in order to examine the effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills. There are, however, two survey studies conducted on other issues of the learning strategies of writing. Since there is no any local research which has studied this matter so far, the present study aimed at examining the effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills in Ethiopian context.

Objectives of the Study

This study was intended to examine the

effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills. Specifically, the study intended to identify what differences students show in their writing performance when they learn writing lessons with receiving training on the learning strategies of writing and without receiving training on the learning strategies of writing with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics.

Research Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis (Ho): There is no significant difference between students who receive training on the learning strategies of writing and those who do not receive training on the learning strategies of writing with regard to their writing skills to include relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics;

Alternative Hypothesis (Ha): There is a significant difference between students who receive training on the learning strategies of writing and those who do not receive training on the learning strategies of writing with regard to their writing skills to include relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar,

appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics.

Significance of the Study

The researcher believes that the findings of this study have the following importance. In the first place, it adds value to our knowledge that training in the learning strategies of writing significantly improves students' writing skills although a few studies have found that the training does not have significant effects on students' writing skills. In relation to this idea, Graham (1997:83-84) says, "While experiments in learning strategy training in foreign languages have produced mixed results, some positive (e.g. those reported in Oxford et al., 1990), some negative (Wenden, 1987), some partially successful (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), there are indications that steps can be taken to maximize the chances of success." Moreover, the findings of this study may help English language teachers and/or teaching material writers to note that they should introduce writing tasks in the context of training in the learning strategies of writing so that students could improve their writing skills by using the strategies appropriately and by taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing in and outside class. Furthermore, readers of this paper may note from the findings that learning writing lessons through receiving

training on the learning strategies of writing makes them significantly improve their writing skills. Thus, they may continue to practice using the strategies whenever they carry out writing tasks in and outside class. Lastly, this study may serve as a springboard for future researchers who are interested to fill in the research gaps with regard to whether training in the learning strategies of writing brings significantly different effects on different ability groups, gender, age, etc. regarding their writing skills.

Delimitation of the Study

This study, as indicated above, was intended to examine the effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills to include relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. The study did not examine if the training brings significantly different effects on different ability groups, gender, age, etc. concerning their writing skills. Moreover, this study was delimited to Hawassa University, to which the researcher is a member of staff, and to freshman program. According to the existing placement policy, students from across the country are randomly distributed to the higher learning institutions. Hence, the student population does not vary from one university to another

in terms of characteristics such as demography, academic and social background, etc. Freshman program was chosen because getting access to representative sample is possible only here where students of all departments take a writing course.

Review of Related Literature

Controlled Writing Tasks

Controlled writing asks students to carry out writing activities that are completely controlled by the instructor. Some of the typical controlled writing tasks include copying correct sentences, filling in blanks by choosing correct responses among given alternatives, matching beginning and endings of sentences, and sequencing jumbled words (Atkins et al., 1996; Baker and Westrup, 2000; Gomez and Gomez, 1996). The teaching/learning of controlled writing, thus, focuses on accuracy.

Guided Writing Tasks

Guided writing, unlike controlled writing, asks students to accomplish tasks by writing appropriate responses of their own. Students are not usually made to repeat something or choose responses among given alternatives or match something. "Here the students are given guidance, e.g. some content by way of

ideas, notes etc., but in the exercises they have some choice and far more opportunity to make mistakes" (Atkins et al., 1996:116). Guided writing involves tasks such as gap-fill sentences, changing sentences, completing sentences, and parallel sentences (Westwood, 2008; Atkins et al., 1996; Baker and Westrup, 2000). The teaching/learning of guided writing, thus, focuses on accuracy; however, here, there is a greater tolerance of errors than in controlled writing.

Free Writing Tasks

Free writing usually asks students to produce paragraphs or essays on their own or given topics without being controlled by the instructor: students decide about what to write, how much to write, how to organize, the pace, and the writing conventions (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Atkins et al., 1996; Feldman, 2000; Baker and Westrup, 2000; Gomez and Gomez, 1996). The main role of the instructor is to give a little support to guide students how to come up with effective paragraphs or essays. The teaching/learning of free writing mainly asks students to keep on writing down whatever comes into their mind about the topic; they should not stop writing to think and write the most appropriate vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization even if they may encounter problems. The typical tasks of the free writing includes writing paragraphs or essays on students' own or given topics, creative writing, diaries, and dialogues, writing a new version of a story, and rewriting the ending of a book. Free writing considers that the process of writing is much more important than the product of writing.

Learning Strategies of Writing

The following are the learning strategies of writing for each of the six groups of the learning strategies that the students were taught the writing lessons through (source: Oxford, 1990 - an authority in the area).

Memory

• Writing such as a little story by using new words just before or while doing actual writing tasks to help one successfully accomplish his/her actual writing tasks

Cognitive

• Carrying out a piece of writing by repeating given words or expressions and/or ideas to emphasize them if one thinks they are important for his/her discussion

• Carrying out a piece of writing by collecting, practicing, and employing commonly used expressions, structures and formats to help one maximize the

attractiveness of his/her writing

• Writing paragraphs or essays by copying and/or collecting paragraphs or essays both in the target language and one's own language/Amharic and comparing and contrasting these in terms of organization of ideas, subject matter treatment, language use, etc. to help him/her produce effective texts

• Carrying out a piece of writing by using various sources in order to get information to help oneself write effectively

• Writing by reasoning deductively about the position of adjectives, adverbs, articles, etc. to help one improve his/her grammatical accuracy

• Carrying out a (difficult) piece of writing in one's own language/Amharic to prepare the first draft and then translating this into the target language to help oneself produce effective writing

• Doing a piece of writing by transferring one's own grammatical knowledge of L1/Amharic to the target language or one's own knowledge from one aspect of the target language to another aspect of it or conceptual knowledge from one field to another to help one successfully accomplish his/her writing

• Taking notes on some issues while

reading to help one improve his/her writing

• Practicing summarizing long texts in a paragraph or two to help one improve his/her writing

• Using a variety of emphasis techniques such as color underlining, CAPITAL LETTERS, BIG WRITING, bold writing, and using symbols

• Writing paragraphs or essays by going through series of stages: plan, draft edit, rewrite, etc. to help oneself produce effective paragraphs or essays

Compensation

• Carrying out writing tasks by adjusting or approximating the messages by producing less appropriate sentences if one cannot come up with the most appropriate sentences

• Writing by making up words of one's own if he/she fails to come up with appropriate vocabulary to express the intended concepts

• Writing by using circumlocutions or synonyms if one could not produce single words that can accurately reveal the intended concepts or ideas

Metacognitive

• Writing by overviewing

comprehensively key concepts, principles, or set of materials of the writing tasks and associating these with what one has already known, i.e., one understands why an activity is being done, builds needed vocabulary, and makes associations with what has already been known to help him/her come up with effective writings

• Writing by deciding in advance to become aware of particular details of a writing task, i.e., which aspects of a writing task to focus on such as structure, content, tone, sentence construction, punctuation, etc. to help oneself produce effective writings

• Writing by making efforts to find out how to improve one's own writing by reading books and talking to his/her classmates, friends out of class, or parents and use this knowledge to build up one's own writing skills

• Doing writing by budgeting one's time in advance properly to help oneself successfully accomplish a piece of writing

• Writing by identifying the purpose of a writing task to help oneself effectively achieve the intended objectives

• Carrying out writing by identifying errors of one's own writing and determining which ones cause serious confusions, track the

sources, and trying to eliminate such errors to make his/her writing as effective as possible

• Writing by setting one's own assessment criteria in advance to make oneself work hard

• Writing by conducting self-evaluation on one's own writings (e.g., by comparing one's writings with the writings of other classmates)

• Writing by creating the best possible environment, scheduling well, and keeping a language learning notebook for oneself to help him/her produce effective writings

Affective

• Writing by making positive statements to oneself about one's own performance just before one starts writing to help him/her feel more confident and thus do effectively

• Writing by deciding to take risks wisely, i.e., writing by making a conscious decision to take reasonable risks regardless of the possibility of making errors or encountering difficulties to help one produce effective writings

• Practicing a (difficult) piece of writing by rewarding oneself for successfully accomplishing (e.g., by telling oneself that he/she has done well and thus he/she deserves

a rest, an entertainment, etc.) to motivate oneself to keep on doing well various writing tasks in the future

•   Doing writing by thinking about one's own emotions just before or while writing and if he/she feels tension, anxiety, or fear, he/she may try to avoid or minimize these problems by taking appropriate actions against them to (help him/her) get relief and, as a result, be able to successfully accomplish the writing tasks

•   Writing by discussing with one's classmates just before or while writing about problems he/she encounters, how he/she feels (i.e., interested or bored) about writing tasks, and his/her attitudes towards learning writing to make him/her successfully accomplish them because his/her classmates may help him/her to improve his/her writing problems, feelings and attitudes

Social

•   Writing by asking one's own instructor for clarification or verification on what to do, how to do, when to do, etc. just before or while doing writing tasks/exercises to help oneself successfully accomplish the tasks

•   Writing by asking one's instructor for correction of some writing difficulties while

doing or just after completing writing to help oneself come up with effective writings

•   Carrying out writing by asking one's classmates, friends, parents, or neighbors to correct one's writings after completing writing to help oneself improve his/her writing

•   Writing by working with one's classmates to help oneself improve his/her writing

•   Writing by thinking about the thoughts and feelings of one's readers, before or while carrying out a piece of writing, i.e., trying to worry about what one's readers may like and dislike

•   Writing by trying to keep in mind the reader one is writing to and trying to meet his/her needs as much as possible

Theoretical Foundations of Learning Strategies Training

The learning Strategies training has roots in cognitive-ism and humanism learning theories. As cognitive-ism began to dominate the principles of teaching/learning, an important change that has been made is considering a student as an active participant who could manage his/her own learning by "selectively attending to incoming data, hypothesizing, comparing, elaborating,

reconstructing its meaning and integrating it with previously stored information for future use" (Wenden, 1991:1). Wenden (1991), quotes Dubin and Olshtain (1986), says that humanistic views focus on meaningful communication, learning as self-realization, a learner to have an important involvement in decision-making, and a teacher to be a facilitator as well as encouraging cooperative learning. Thus, learning strategies-based instruction is a student-centered approach to teaching (Ze-sheng, 2008:3).

Narrow Focus, Broad Focus, or Combination Approaches to Learning Strategies Training

Oxford (1990), an authority in the area, discusses that learning strategies training can be conducted by using a narrow focus, broad focus, or combination approach. A narrow focus approach involves teaching students one or two learning strategies. This approach has the following benefits. Firstly, it makes the trainer to cover more learning strategies in short time as only one or two strategies are introduced at a time independently. Secondly, it minimizes the possibility of confusing students with different types of strategies because the strategies are introduced one by one. Thirdly, a narrow focus allows the instructor to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of training because he/she

teaches each strategy separately. However, the downside of this approach is that it does not promote students' language learning because the strategies are not integrated to interact with one another.

A trainer who uses a broad focus approach introduces more learning strategies from all the classification groups. This approach requires a trainer to conduct the training by integrating different types of language learning strategies of each category so that learners could notice how the strategies interact with each other. A broad focus approach improves learners' belief about language learning. "However, this broad focus does not allow precise assessment of training effectiveness in reference to any specific strategy". (op. cit., p 205)

A combination approach is an amalgamation of broad focus and narrow focus approaches. This approach involves some procedures. Firstly, the trainer provides students with all the language learning strategies of all the classification groups and asks them to rate the role of the strategies. Secondly, among strategies reported by students as useful, the trainer chooses strategies that are not too familiar and too strange. Then, a separate or an integrated and an implicit or an explicit training is conducted on the strategies. "This is an excellent way to approach strategy

training. It gives learners the "big picture" at first, and then moves into specific strategies which the learners have chosen themselves. The element of learner choice in instructing structuring training is very important, since learning strategies are the epitome of learner choice and self-direction" (op. cit., p 205).

Separate versus Integrated Approaches to Learning Strategies Training

Learning strategies training can be carried out by using a separate or an integrated approach. A separate approach involves teaching learning strategies without incorporating them into the language lessons. "Arguments in favor of separate training programs advance the notion that strategies are generalizable to many contexts…and that students will learn strategies better if they can focus all their attention on developing strategic processing skills rather than try to learn content at the same time…" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 152). However, according to some scholars such as Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990), this approach does not enhance students' language learning since students do not receive training on how and when to use strategies and on how to evaluate their learning as well as the success of strategies.

Wenden (1991), O'Malley and Chamot (1990)

and Oxford (1990) discuss that an integrated approach, unlike a separate approach, requires the trainer to teach strategies by including them into appropriate tasks of a language course. Students are shown when and how to use strategies and how to evaluate the role of the strategies. "Those in favor of integrated strategy instruction programs, on the other hand, argue that learning in context is more effective than learning separate skills whose immediate applicability may not be evident to the learner…and that practicing strategies on authentic academic and language tasks facilitates the transfer of strategies to similar tasks encountered in other classes…" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 152).

Implicit versus Explicit Approaches to Learning Strategies Training

A learning strategies training can be conducted by choosing an implicit or an explicit approach. An implicit approach is an embedded approach. The trainer who chooses this approach sets language tasks intended to make students employ learning strategies to help them successfully accomplish the tasks, but the trainer does not inform students about the role of the strategies and when and how to use the strategies (Wenden, 1991; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, Wenden and Rubin, 1987). This approach, according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford

(1990), has two merits. Firstly, as the strategies are embedded, it minimizes the risk learners may oppose the training. Secondly, "An advantage cited for strategy training embedded in instructional materials is that little teacher training is required….As students work on exercises and activities, they learn to use the strategies that are cued by the textbook" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 153). On the other hand, this approach has some drawbacks. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), it does not make students take on more responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, it does not make learners use strategies flexibly in a variety of contexts and maintain strategies overtime (Wenden and Rubin, 1987).

An explicit approach, unlike an implicit approach, requires the trainer to apply the following procedures: identifying language learning strategies by name, explaining/describing the importance of the strategies, demonstrating (through actual language tasks) in which contexts to use and how to use the strategies, and how to transfer the strategies into other contexts, making students practice the strategies, and asking students to evaluate the importance of the strategies in improving their language performance. With regard to this approach, Chamot (2005:123) writes, "Explicit instruction includes the development of students' awareness of their strategies, teacher modeling of strategic thinking, identifying the strategies by name, providing opportunities for practice and self-evaluation." According to Wenden and Rubin (1987), an explicit approach helps learners maintain strategies over time for a variety of learning contexts and thus they take on more responsibility for their own learning. In Oxford's (1990: 201) language, "the general goals of such training are to make language learning more meaningful, to encourage a collaborative spirit between learner and teacher, to learn about options for language learning, to learn and practice strategies that facilitate self-reliance."

Procedures for Conducting a Learning Strategies Training Lesson

There are several models suggested for conducting a language learning strategies training lesson (Hosenfeld *et al*., 1981; O'Malley and Chamot, 1988; Chamot and Kupper, 1989; Oxford, 1990a; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Grenfell and Harris, 1999). Oxford (1990) writes that the instructor of a language learning strategies training lesson should follow the procedures below (note that only the model of Oxford is discussed here for being chosen for the present study): ask learners to do an activity without strategy training; ask learners if they have used any

strategy while doing the activity, and ask them to evaluate the role of the strategy (if used); suggest and explain some useful strategies and the rationale for using the new strategies; ask learners to practice the strategies by doing the task again or through other language tasks; demonstrate how to transfer the strategies to new learning tasks; ask learners to practice the strategies in new learning tasks; ask learners to evaluate the importance of the strategies used, i.e., if they found the strategies useful in helping them successfully accomplish writing tasks.

Research Methodology

The Research Design

This project was mainly an experimental study conducted to examine the effects of training in the learning strategies of writing in improving students' writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. To this end, the selected freshman program students of Hawassa University were randomly assigned to the experimental and the control groups. Students in the experimental group were taught lessons of the 'Basic Writing Skills' course with training in the learning strategies of writing, whereas those in the control group were taught the lessons

without training in the learning strategies of writing. Interviews were also held with randomly selected students of the experimental group. Focus was given to exploring the students' feelings about the training in terms of improving their use of the strategies and their belief about taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing and about their attitude towards the training.

Procedures of the Experiment

Preparation of Teaching Material for Experimental Group

A teaching material on 'Basic Writing Skills' course was prepared, based on the course syllabus, by choosing the combination, integrated, and explicit approaches discussed earlier. The teaching material was prepared by using the model of Oxford (1990). Her model was chosen, first, because it is the most suitable model and thus it has been preferred by many researchers. Second, the model briefly discusses procedures that are easy to understand.

Preparation of Pre and Post-tests

Pre and post-tests were prepared by the researcher. The tests were constructed based on the course syllabus. The tests were intended to measure students' writing skills

with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. Students were asked to complete sentences by writing appropriate subjects and predicates and rewrite sentences by correcting errors, complete paragraphs by writing appropriate topic sentences, concluding sentences, and relevant details, rearrange jumbled sentences in logical orders and complete paragraphs by writing appropriate cohesive devices, complete essays by writing appropriate thesis statements and concluding paragraphs, identify parts of an essay: introduction, body, and conclusion, rearrange jumbled paragraphs in logical orders, and write essays to argue for/against. To validate the tests, comments were obtained from most senior colleagues of the researcher.

Selection of the Setting

For the study, the researcher purposefully chose Hawassa University to which he is a member of staff. The University admits a cohort of students with similar educational background and demographic characteristics that all other universities admit across the country.

Selection of Departments

From the existing departments of the University, Management Department (a total

of 82 students) was randomly selected by drawing lots. The researcher used a simple random sampling because it allows a department to have equal chance of being selected, i.e., the probability of a department being selected is unaffected by the selection of another department. Thus, it is possible to be confident that the department chosen represents all the departments of the University.

Assignment of Experimental and Control Groups

The following procedures were applied to assign students into the experimental and the control groups. First, a pre-test was administered to students. Second, the test paper of each student was marked by two instructors who received training on how to score the test. The analytic approach was chosen to mark the composition. This approach is preferred for being the most effective approach to achieve reliability. The rating scale used for the approach is the one provided by Heaton (1990). Heaton (1990: 146) describes the scale in this way: "The following rating scale is the result of considerable and careful research conducted in the scoring of compositions in the United States". Third, Pearson r was computed on the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 20 to see the correlations of

the scores given by the instructors regarding students' performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. Then, average scores were taken since the R-values are closer to 1.000; the p-value is .000; the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Fourth, without naming experimental and control, an equal number of students were put into two groups randomly by drawing lots. Fifth, histograms were produced for students' scores on each of the aspects of writing to see if the data look like they approximate a normal distribution, and it is shown that the distributions are symmetric and have the shape of the cross-section of a bell where many of the scores are around the mean scores. In relation to this idea, Connolly (2007: 43/46) says, "Overall the histogram is a good chart to use when displaying the characteristics of a single scale variable as it is simple to understand and is able to display the shape and distribution of the data very clearly and accessibly." Sixth, Independent-Samples T Test was computed on the SPSS version 20 to see if the two groups had similar writing performance on each of the aspects, and the computation showed that they had similar performance (t-value < 1.56, p-value > .122). Finally, the groups were named experimental

and control by drawing lots. Thus, the probability of a group being selected as experimental or control is unaffected by the selection of another group; it is possible to be confident that the internal characteristics of the groups were similar.

Selection of Instructors to Correct the Test Papers

The following procedures were employed in order to choose instructors to mark the students' test papers. First, the researcher identified 12 instructors who often have offered writing courses. The researcher did that because he thought that these instructors may have a better motivation to correct writing skills tests. Then, among these instructors, he randomly selected (by drawing lots) two instructors to correct the test papers. Prior to the experiment, training was given to the instructors on how to mark the papers.

Administration of a Post-test

After conducting the experiment for 80 hours (5 hours a week for 16 consecutive weeks), wherein the experimental and the control groups were made to attend the same session (morning), the same post-test was administered to the experimental and the control groups. The test was intended to measure the students' writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents,

organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. The students took the test by the same invigilators in the same examination rooms and in the same session (morning) in which they had taken the pre-test.

Correction of the Post-test

The post-test paper of each student in the experimental and the control groups was marked by the instructors who had corrected the pre-test, and the average scores were taken since Pearson r computed showed that the r-values are closer to 1.000; the p-value is .000; the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Analytic approach was used to mark the composition. The rating scale chosen for the approach is the one suggested by Heaton (1990).

Methods of Data Analysis

Independent-Samples T Test was computed on the SPSS version 20 to examine if there is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups with regard to their writing skills to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics on the post-test. The Independent-Samples T Test was chosen because the groups are independent in that they were categorized into the experimental and the control groups randomly by drawing lots. In relation to this idea, Stephens (2004: 34) says, "The purpose of the test is to compare the means of two populations when independent samples have been chosen." The significance level was taken at 0.05. Before computing the Independent-Samples T Tests, histograms were produced for the experimental and the control group students' scores on each of the aspects of writing to see if the distributions are symmetric and have the shape of the cross-section of a bell where many of the scores are closer to the mean scores.

The T Tests only tell us there is a significant difference (if any), but do not tell us the magnitude of the effects. For that reason, effect sizes were calculated. "There are a wide variety of effect size measures around but the one we use in conjunction with the t-test is called Cohen's d. The formula for this effect size is as follows: d = (Mean for group A − Mean for group B) / Pooled standard deviation. Where the Pooled standard deviation = (Standard deviation of group 1 + Standard deviation of group 2) / 2" (Muijs, 2004:136). Cohen, as cited in Muijs (2004:139), suggests the following guidelines for determining the effect sizes: 0–0.20 = weak effect; 0.21–0.50 = modest effect; 0.51–

1.00 = moderate effect; >1.00 = strong effect.

Results of the Independent-Samples T Test of Students' Performance in the Post-test

The following table shows the results of the Independent-Samples T Test computed to examine if there is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups on the post-test with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics.

	Experimental Group			Control Group			DF	T-value	P-value	Significance
	N	X	SD	N	X	SD				
Content	41	32.48	7.01	41	26.06	6.99	80	4.15	.000	Significant
Organization	41	30.13	5.01	41	27.37	4.94	80	2.50	.014	Significant
Grammar	41	26.10	6.25	41	20.32	6.03	80	4.25	.000	Significant
Vocabulary	41	15.39	3.48	41	11.58	4.49	80	4.28	.000	Significant
Mechanics	41	4.84	1.14	41	3.89	1.19	80	3.70	.000	Significant

The above table reveals that the mean score of the experimental group is 32.48 whereas the mean score of the control group is 26.06 with regard to discussing relevant contents in writing. The standard deviation of the experimental group is 7.01. The standard deviation of the control group is 6.99. The table indicates that the t-value is 4.15, and the p-value is .000. This shows that there is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups indicating that the experimental group outperformed that of the control group (df = 80, t-value > table value, p-value < .05). The students in the experimental group significantly exceeded the students in the control group to discuss relevant ideas in their writing because the students in the former group could benefit from learning the writing lessons through receiving training on the learning strategies of writing wherein, to help them discuss relevant details, they were made to practice using the strategies when carrying out writing tasks in or outside class. Cohen's d = .92 which shows the effect size is moderate.

As indicated in the above table, the experimental group scores the mean of 30.13

with regard to organizing ideas appropriately in writing whereas that of the control group scores the mean of 27.37. The standard deviation of the experimental group is indicated as 5.01 and the standard deviation of the control group is shown as 4.94. The table demonstrates that the t-value is 2.50, and the p-value is .014. This indicates that there is a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups showing that the experimental group surpassed that of the control group (df = 80, t-value > table value, p-value < .05). The students in the experimental group significantly exceeded that of the students in the control group because the students in the former group could benefit from learning the writing lessons in the context of receiving training on the learning strategies of writing in which, to help them organize ideas in logical orders, they were asked to practice using the strategies when they carry out writing tasks inside or outside class. Cohen's d = .55 which shows the effect size is moderate.

The table also depicts that the mean score of the experimental group is 26.10, and that of the control group is 20.32 with regard to using accurate grammar in writing. The table demonstrates that the standard deviation of the experimental group is 6.25 whereas the standard deviation of the control group is

6.03. The t and p-values are revealed as 4.25 and .000 respectively. This shows that the difference between the students in the experimental and the control groups with regard to using accurate grammar in their writing is significant indicating that the experimental group exceeded that of the control group (df = 80, t-value > table value, p-value < .05). The students in the former group significantly outperformed that of the students in the latter group because the students of the former group could benefit from learning the writing lessons in the context of receiving training on the learning strategies of writing where, to help them construct grammatically correct sentences/expressions, they were asked to use the strategies when they practice writing tasks inside or outside class. Cohen's d = .94 which shows the effect size is moderate.

As demonstrated in the table above, with regard to using appropriate vocabulary in writing, the experimental group scores the mean of 15.39 while the control group scores the mean of 11.58. In the table, it is shown that the former group has the standard deviation of 3.48 whereas the latter group has the standard deviation of 4.49. The t-value is 4.28, and the p-value is .000. This demonstrates that there is a significant difference between the experimental and the

control groups where the experimental group outperformed that of the control group (df = 80, t-value > table value, p-value < .05). The students in the experimental group significantly exceeded the students in the control group because the students in the experimental group could benefit from learning the writing lessons through receiving training on the learning strategies of writing wherein, to help them produce words/expressions that can address the intended messages, they were made to use the strategies when they practice writing tasks in or outside class. Cohen's d = .96 which shows the effect size is moderate.

As shown in the above table, the mean score of the experimental group is 4.84 whereas the mean score of the control group is 3.89 with regard to using correct mechanics. The former group has the standard deviation of 1.14 while the latter group has standard deviation of 1.19. The t-value is shown as 3.70, and the p-value is shown as .000. This demonstrates that the difference between the students in the experimental and the control groups with regard to using correct mechanics is significant indicating that the experimental group outstripped that of the control group (df = 80, t-value > table value, p-value < .05). The students in the former group significantly exceeded the students in the latter group

because the students in the former group could benefit from learning the writing lessons through receiving training on the learning strategies of writing in which, to help them use correct spelling, capitalization and punctuation, they were asked to practice using the strategies when they carry out writing tasks in or outside class. Cohen's d = .81 which shows the effect size is moderate.

This shows that the null hypothesis should be rejected and the alternative hypothesis should be accepted saying there is a significant difference between the experimental group who received training on the learning strategies of writing and the control group who did not receive training on the learning strategies of writing with regard to their writing skills to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics indicating that the experimental group significantly exceeded that of the control group. Cohen's d = .95 which shows the effect size is moderate. The students in the experimental group could benefit from learning the writing lessons through receiving training on the learning strategies of writing because, to help them improve their writing skills, they were made to practice using the strategies when they carry out writing tasks inside or outside class.

The present results are consistent with the findings of Gamelin (1996); McMullen (2009); Lv and Chen (2010); Rajak (2004), among some, who found that the students who were made to learn writing lessons through receiving training on the learning strategies of writing significantly outperformed their peers who were not taught in this way.

Findings of the Study

The Independent-Samples T Test computed before the experiment showed that the experimental and the control groups had similar writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately, and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics (t-values <1.56, p-values > .122); however, the Independent-Samples T Test conducted for each of the aspects of writing after the experiment revealed that the students in the experimental group who learned the writing lessons by receiving training on the learning strategies of writing significantly outperformed that of the students in the control group who did not learn the writing lessons in this way (t-values > 2.50, p-values < .014).

As the interview held with the selected students of the experimental group demonstrated, students in this group could significantly surpass students in the control group because the training benefited the students in the experimental group to learn the role of the strategies to improve their writing skills and it improved their belief about taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing, and thus they continued to use the strategies appropriately when they carried out writing tasks in and outside class.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, this study concludes that training in the learning strategies of writing has significant effects in improving students' writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately, and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. This is because the training benefits students to learn the role of the strategies to improve their writing skills and it improves their belief about taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing, and thus they continue to use the strategies appropriately when they carry out writing tasks in and outside class.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the conclusions of this study:

i. Writing tasks should be introduced in the context of training in the learning strategies of

writing so that students could improve their writing skills by using the strategies appropriately and by taking on more responsibility for their own learning of writing in and outside classroom;

ii. University writing activities/exercises should be a bit challenging so that students will need to use the strategies to help them successfully accomplish their writing tasks. The researcher is making this very recommendation because he observes that the writing exercises do not seem to challenge students;

iii. Studies should be conducted to fill in the research gaps with regard to whether training in the learning strategies of writing brings significantly different effects on different ability groups, gender, age, etc. regarding their writing skills. This study did not examine these because of its delimitation.

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