

## EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO WRITING ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENTS' WRITING PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract:** Students' motivation to improve writing skills has increased over the last decade in North Macedonia with the incorporation of the obligatory final state exam in English that each high school student has to take before graduation. The last part of the exam requires that students express their writing skill in two assignments, including an essay, which are followed by a two-fold grading system where each written assignment is evaluated by two different trained evaluators. Therefore, writing as a skill takes up an important part in the evaluation of students' proficiency level of English as a Foreign Language. While learners struggle in learning how to write properly in English, teachers face problems in finding suitable ways in which writing can be taught. One of the main reasons why teachers cannot achieve satisfactory results is the fact that they have to find a way to integrate writing along with other skills when facing lack of time and lack of a composition class. Considering students' needs to improve writing and identifying their difficulty in mastering this skill, I decided to conduct a study that would give insights into different types of writing. This study examines two approaches to writing: controlled and free writing. It was carried out with two groups of high school students aged 17-18 who participated in a two-month instruction and intensive course in writing. The participants were tested on their writing skills before and after the writing instruction. Considering that all students were attending intermediate level of English language instruction, they could all participate regardless of their proficiency level or ability to write. The method of assessment of this study was a qualitative one, in terms of performance assessment, which included qualitative activities such as portfolios. The outcomes of this case study prove the hypothesis that students respond better and improve their writing performance when the teacher uses the free writing approach rather than the controlled writing approach. Furthermore, students who have been engaged in free writing groups and have practiced the use of drafts and unrestricted composing have shown more progress than students who have learned fixed patterns. This research proved useful for students taking part in it because they were offered an opportunity to develop their writing abilities and prepare themselves for the upcoming state exam. Beneficiaries of the findings of the research are also teachers and learners of English as a Second Language who face the same problems.

**Keywords:** writing skills, free writing, controlled writing, EFL learners

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing as a productive skill is a very important integral part in the language learning process. It is a skill that EFL students are expected to master in a certain level of their language acquisition. However, writing is not considered as an easy skill to master by students, and it is certainly considered a difficult skill to teach by many EFL teachers. According to Reid (1993), many teachers used writing as a skill that only supported language learning. This assumption about writing led them to think that writing can be useful as a technique for adding interest or as a testing device for assessing grammar errors. Nowadays, writing has become an important communicative skill as a result of many research that have been done on this field. EFL teachers have come to a level of recognizing writing as a skill equal to other integral skills of language learning and many of them have investigated different approaches to writing.

Analyzing students' performance in both controlled and free versions of writing instruction has been a controversial topic amongst researchers. Controlled writing is the predecessor of free writing with an emphasis on error prevention and practice of controlled structures (Reid, 1993). On the other hand, free writing as a descendant and a more contemporary approach, allows expressiveness and has proven to enhance critical thinking among students instead of focusing on accuracy and correcting sentence structure (Major, 1994) Even though the teaching of writing has existed as a field of study for over a century, composition classes for native speakers of English began five decades ago. These classes mainly included students' writing related to literature and no kind of formal instruction on the writing process itself was provided. Students were not actually taught how to write but they were asked to write papers for which the teacher provided correction of grammar errors. ESL composition on the other hand started developing a decade later but only to be incorporated in the teaching of the language as a support skill. Moreover, writing was considered as a means of assessment of ESL student error and students' ability to compose was not a primary concern for teachers of English as a second language (Reid, 1993). From the beginnings of ESL composition until today, researchers have attempted to revolutionize the concept of teaching writing from language-based writing to product-based and later on to a process-based approach to teaching.

The purpose of this study is to make a distinction between two different approaches to writing, to investigate the effects of controlled writing in addition to free writing and analyze how students respond to these types of writing. Therefore, the hypothesis of this research is as follows: Free writing as an approach in teaching writing as a skill, can improve students' overall performance better than controlled writing. This study was based on a similar study conducted by Song (1998) with a group of first year female students aged around 19 at a college in Korea. The data analysis showed that the practice of free writing through dialogue journals improved students' writing quality more than answering adapted comprehension questions as a practice of controlled writing.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study included students aged 17-18, who were divided into two groups, a controlled and a free writing group. Each group consisted of 25-30 students who attended writing instruction classes once a week over a period of two months. The controlled writing group was working according to controlled writing techniques where students were given tasks such as copying, substituting, combining, rearranging, completing, dictating, etc. The free writing group was practicing writing by working on a certain topic, writing a letter, writing a short story, writing by using pictures, etc. Students' work was collected every week after each class and was evaluated. The method used to gather data for this study was a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in terms of grading controlled writing tasks and performance assessment, which included qualitative activities such as portfolios. Portfolios include students' writing assignments which served as a basis for following their improvement in writing. In order to ensure reliability and validity, students took a pretest at the beginning and a posttest at the end of the instruction that measured their progress throughout the instruction.

The data gathered throughout the study was analyzed thoroughly and carefully with the purpose of providing reliable results. Moreover, in order to avoid bias, students' pre-tests and post-tests along with other writing samples included in the portfolios were coded with numbers from 1F to 25F for the free writing group and from 1C to 25C for the controlled writing group. Both the pretest and the posttest were evaluated according to an analytic scale which was based on the "Sample Analytic Scale" presented by Reid (1993) in the book "*Teaching ESL writing*" but modified and adapted for this research specifically. The analytic scale used in this study proved to be efficient and gave clear insights into the data analysis by focusing on 5 important categories in writing.

Considering that both the pre-test and post-test were essay tests, certain elements or categories needed to be measured among students and among groups. These categories included the following: 1. Introduction, 2. Support, 3. Organization, 4. Vocabulary and Sentence Structure, and 5. Grammar and Spelling. The grading scale included an evaluation from 2 to 10 points. Students who participated in this study needed to demonstrate minimal knowledge of 2 points in order to be part of the study. This was done with the intention of avoiding the extreme differences in the students' proficiency level.

## 3. RESULTS

The pre-test results for the free writing group will be reported in five categories and students will be categorized according to their average throughout all five categories. The following figures demonstrate students' performance in all categories that have been graded according to the analytic scale as well as students' overall performance in the essay pretests. As shown on Figure 1 students' ability to write an introduction as a whole group in one of the topics they were assigned in the pre-test resulted in an average of 3.2 out of 10. They have shown similar results in the category of vocabulary and sentence structure with an average of 3.52 and the category of grammar and spelling with an average of 3.84. The other two categories, however, have shown lower numbers where students' average in providing support in the essay test has resulted in 2.88, whereas students' ability to organize the essay has shown to be even lower with an average of 2.4. According to these results, students' strongest point in writing an essay before the instruction, in comparison to the four other categories, was grammar and spelling and the weakest point was organization.

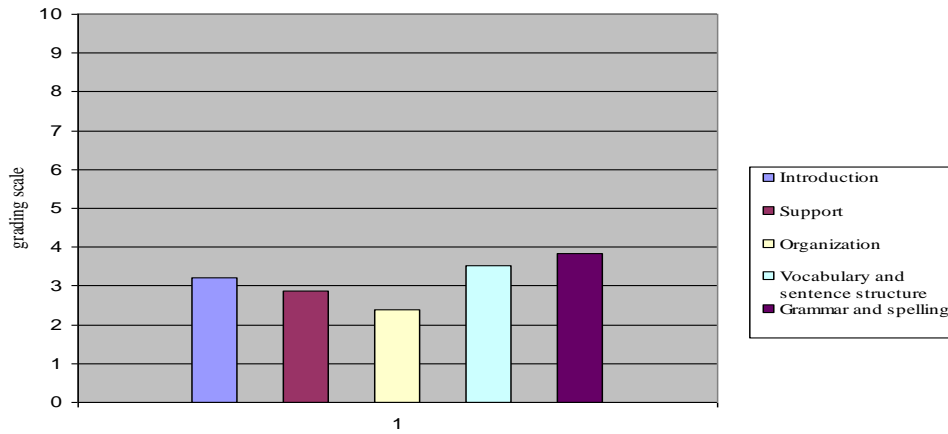


Figure 1. Pretest results for free writing group presented in categories of writing

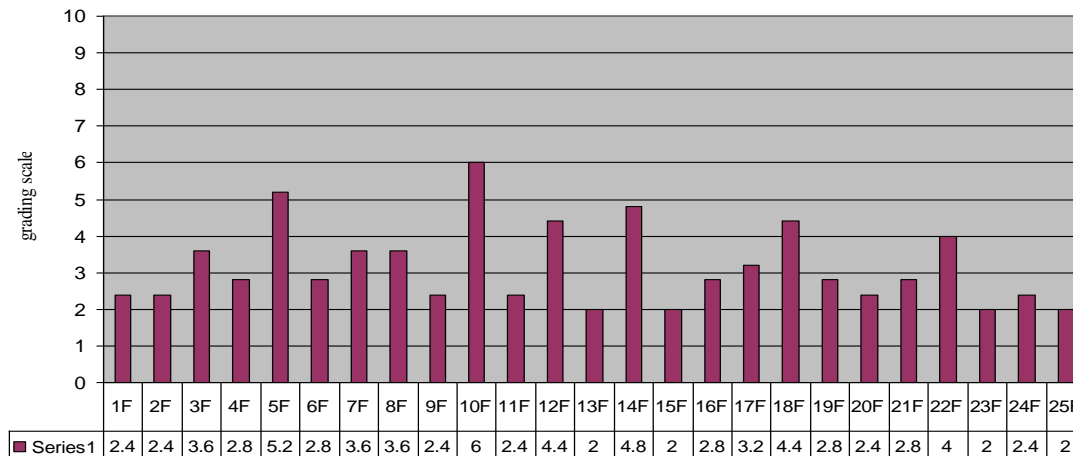


Figure 2. Pretest results for free writing group for each student individually

This figure shows students' average individual scores through all five categories. One student has achieved an average of 6 on the whole essay. Three students have resulted in an average from 4 to 5, whereas a number of three students had an average from 3 to 4. A higher number of students, 11, have scored an average from 2 to 3, whereas only three students have been graded with the lower score of 2. The overall average of students' performance in the pre-test essay, including all five categories and all 25 students who were participants in the free writing group is an average of 3.168 out of ten.

The post-test results show significant differences throughout categories and in the students' overall progress, compared to the pretest results. The differences will be shown in the comparison analysis. The following figures report on students' performance in the post-test through all five categories of writing and students' overall performance in the essay post-tests. Introduction, as the first category to be evaluated has shown an average of 4.48 for all 25 students. Students have an average of 4.16 for their ability to provide support in their essay tests and an average of 4 in their ability to organize their essays. The fourth category which shows the scoring of vocabulary and sentence structure has resulted in an average of 5.12 whereas the last category to be evaluated (grammar and spelling) reports an average of 4.64. According to these numbers presented in the table, students have proven to be more successful in the category of vocabulary and sentence structure whereas their weakest point in comparison to the other categories is organization with a slight difference of numbers, with 5.12 and 4 respectively.

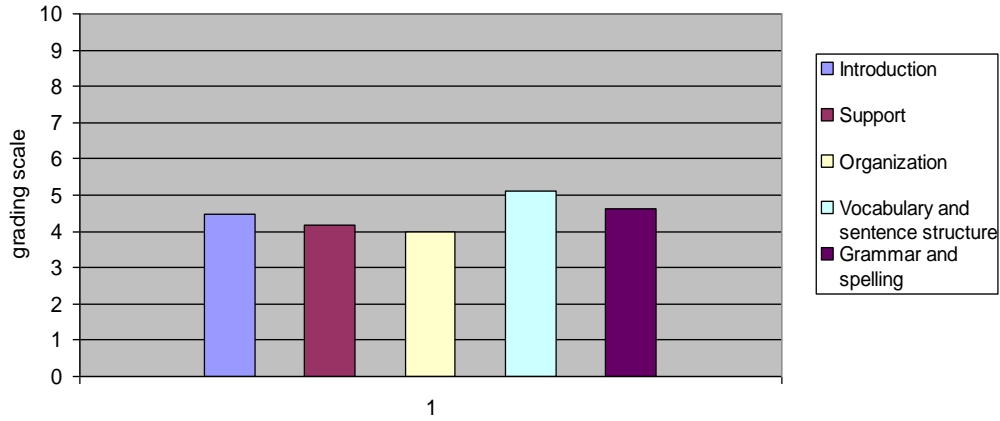


Figure 3. Posttest results for free writing group presented in categories of writing

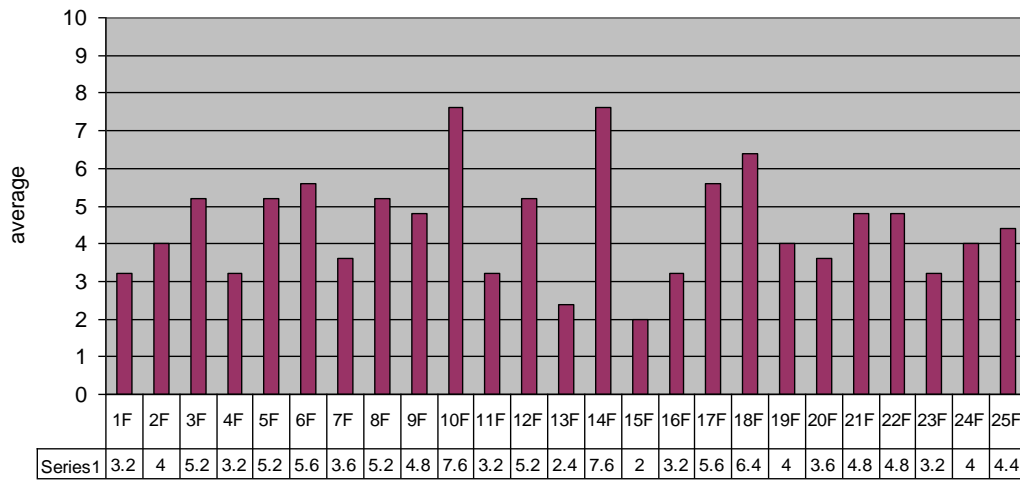


Figure 4. Posttest results for free writing group for each student individually

The analysis of students' essays by including all the five categories together, students' progress as individuals shows the following results. Only one student has resulted with a scoring of 2 points in the post-test and another one with an average of 2.4. There is a total of 6 students who have resulted in an average between 3 to 4 and a total of 8 students with an average of 4 to 5. An average of 5 to 6 has been achieved by 6 students whereas only one student has scored an average of 6.4. Two students have proven the most successful in comparison to the others with an average of 7.6, which is the highest score among all students.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

According to all the findings of this study, which have been illustrated in detail above, the free writing group has shown more progress in the writing process than the controlled writing group. This concluding statement regarding the results of the study, confirms the hypothesis of this research which states: Free writing as an approach in teaching writing as a skill, can improve students' overall performance better than controlled writing.

According to other studies, originality in writing can arise only after students have practiced enough and have mastered certain patterns in writing (Silva & Matsuda, 2001). In comparison to the results of the study, students from the controlled group showed great progress in the controlled writing exercises, which were conducted during the writing instruction. Thus, they managed to learn a number of sentence structures and patterns by practicing controlled writing exercises during the instruction. The majority of students did well in recalling those structures when asked to complete the exercises that would be included in the portfolio. However, the same students failed in using these patterns during the essay post-test, which required them to express their original ideas. Results show that students who practiced controlled writing did not show much progress and had difficulties in expressing what they

had learned during the instruction in the post-test. Therefore, this study shows the opposite, considering that students could not express their original thoughts, even after they had practiced and most of them had proven to have mastered certain sentence structures and patterns. On the other hand, the results of the study confirm Reid's (1993) claim that original thought is not necessarily enhanced by accuracy and repetition of sentence structures. Moreover, Reid claims that these activities 'severely restrict composing and original thought' (Reid, 1993) and the results of this study seem to confirm this.

The findings of this study show that students who have been engaged in free writing groups and have practiced the use of drafts and unrestricted composing have shown more progress than students who have learned fixed patterns. These findings demonstrate clearly that the free writing group has outperformed the controlled writing group. This evidence confirms the evidence presented in the example of students who have proven to have mastered certain syntactic structures but have failed in composing their original thoughts (Silva & Matsuda, 2001). Moreover, Zamel agrees that the learning of certain patterns and sentence structures does not amount to the expression of genuine thoughts and ideas, she claims that controlled writing exercises are useful for beginners, when learners are at a lower level of proficiency. According to the results of this study, a number of 9 students who showed progress from the lowest proficiency level in the category of vocabulary and sentence structure belonged to the free writing group (students 1F, 2F, 4F 9F, 11F, 20F, 23F, 24F 25F), whereas only 3 students showed improvement from the lowest proficiency level in the same category (student 13C, 19C, 25C) in the controlled writing group and a total of 7 students who were ranked with the mark 2 who did not show any improvement in this category. These findings show that more students improved from the lowest proficiency level in the free writing group than in the controlled writing group, which proves that controlled writing exercises are not efficient for beginners' progress. After investigating the writing experience of three ESL writers, Zamel concludes that students' improvement can be achieved if writing is contextualized (Zamel, 1990). Considering that students in the free writing group practiced writing in a contextualized setting, this claim is supported by the findings of this study, that show improvement in students' writing from pre-test to post-test.

According to the results presented above, we can see how they are similar to the ones that have been drawn from Bitchener's (2005) research. Students of the controlled writing group have shown great results in the controlled writing exercises after they have practiced through the instruction; however, their results on the post-test have not been satisfactory. The results of the post-test for the controlled writing group have demonstrated that students have not used the certain 'linguistic forms' that they are demonstrated to have learned in the controlled writing exercises. Therefore, students performed well in familiar and safe environments where they had been used to practice certain structures, but they failed in their performance once they were asked to use those forms in a different and unrestricted environment.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research have not only revealed the expected outcomes by supporting the hypotheses, but they have also given insights into some interesting points that need to be considered in writing instruction. Research on students' progress in writing has been an issue for decades and it has covered many important aspects in writing. Considering that this topic has been investigated by many researchers around the world, there have been many different interpretations of the various findings of researchers which at some points contradict each other. The interpretation of findings for this research has shown similar results to some research but different results to others. This could have been caused by the different nature of the sample that each researcher uses. The results of this study have confirmed the assumption that students usually respond better to a free writing approach rather than a controlled one. Free writing has proven to be successful in recognizing students' creativity in expressing their thoughts and ideas in the target language, which serves as a motivation tool for triggering students' interest to write in English. Moreover, the emphasis that this approach puts on the content of students' writing enhances their critical thinking and increases their ability to acquire the language in a meaningful learning environment.

Based on five aspects or categories in writing, students' development has been measured with the use of portfolios. Including more genuine student work with the use of qualitative data makes the results of this study reliable. Even though the pre-test and the post-test serve as proficiency tests by measuring students' ability in writing before and after attending writing instruction, students' work used during the instruction gives authentic information of students' progress and development throughout the process. The study has been conducted based on previous studies and other researchers' claims about controlled writing and free writing as two different approaches. However, the different variables that have been used in this study, such as the number of students, their proficiency level and methods, distinguish it from other similar studies. Moreover, the results of this case study might have been different if the sample had been larger or smaller in number or if the instruction had lasted for a longer or shorter period of

time. The students' proficiency level and the activities and exercises that have been used during the instruction should also be taken as factors that have influenced the outcomes of the study.

There are many contradictory opinions on whether controlled instruction in teaching writing should prevail or free writing techniques should take precedence in the classroom. The findings of this research can assist many teachers or students who are in search of the answers to these questions. The results of this study might serve to motivate teachers using controlled writing to modify their approach and use free writing for a change. The evidence found here about ways of responding to student writing could also be helpful for teachers seeking to vary their approach to giving corrective feedback in a school environment. Applying a non-judgmental approach by offering students descriptive feedback for the work that they have done has resulted in positive outcomes. Finally, it depends on the teacher and his/her ability to analyze students' needs and decide which approach would be most suitable for his/her students in a certain school environment. Free writing has proven to be a useful approach according to this study and many others. Nevertheless, using both free writing and controlled writing interchangeably by balancing them in favor of students' needs is also a good recommendation to be taken into account by teachers.

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