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The Potential of RAFT Strategy for Improving Jordanian EFL Students' Creative Writing¹

ABSTRACT

This study examines the potential effect of RAFT strategy on Jordanian EFL Eleventh-grade students' creative writing. A sample of Eleventh-grade students was purposefully selected from a secondary school in Irbid. The experimental group (n=25) was taught using a RAFT strategy whereas the control group (n= 25) was taught conventionally based on Teacher Book of Action Pack 11. For data collection, a creative writing pre/post- test was used. The findings reveal statistically significant differences in students' means scores in the creative writing post test, in favor of the experimental group which may be attributed to RAFT strategy.

Keywords: RAFT Strategy, Creative Writing, Jordanian EFL Students

1. Introduction

Modern educational systems that seek to achieve their educational aims and objectives always strive to promote students' higher order thinking skills. Since creativity is the focus of the teaching /learning process nowadays, it has become a must to promote the higher order thinking skills since they have become vital for individuals regardless of the nature of their work (Al Hussaini, 2013). One of the main Jordanian educational systems outcomes is to promote students' higher order thinking skills; creativity is one of the most significant manifestations for such skills. The Jordanian Ministry of Education (2006) states in its guidelines

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for the secondary stage that promoting creative writing is one of the outcomes of Action Pack Serious taught in Jordanian schools.

Creative Writing

Creative writing is any form of writing that falls outside of the traditional type of writing skill and can be distinguished from mere traditional writing. Creative writing is mainly and highly connected with using imagination and fantasy, thus it is different from the academic writing imposed in the various school courses. In this sense, creative writing is an expansion of the written production aiming to construct new forms of texts (Nino & Paez, 2018).

As indicated by Jameel and Mohamood (2017), creativity is based on having four basic skills:

- Fluency: The ability to produce abundant new ideas.
- Flexibility: Having the ability to imagine and produce ideas in various types.
- Originality: Being able to create unorthodox ideas.
- Elaboration: The ability to organize previous ideas in a new way.

Locloiey (2012) indicated that creative writing has always played a significant role in EFL instruction as it is one of the key objectives in EFL classrooms. While using creative writing, students can write short stories, poems, fiction stories, autobiographies and many other forms of writing genres. This writer further elaborates that for people who write creatively, this activity can fulfill many daily life functions as it includes engaging in playing a piece of music, then writing about the writer's sensations and feelings relating to this creative act. Thus, creative writing focuses on using imagination to write about the true sensations the individual feels about a certain experience using creative words, sentences and paragraphs. In other words, creative writing enables individuals to express themselves in ways that are not always available in other aspects of life. An individual, for example, can use creative writing to express his/ her true feeling about specific life experiences without feeling threatened by the responses of others.

Barbot, Tan, Randi, Santa-Donato and Grigorenko (2012) explained that creative writing consists of several skills. These include general knowledge and cognition, creative cognition, conation, executive functioning, linguistic and psychomotor skills.

To summarize, in Dawson's (2005, p. 21) point of view concerning creative writing, it is a discipline, an independent body of knowledge combined with the use of specific instructional techniques for improving this knowledge.

RAFT Strategy

RAFT is one of the instructional strategies used to teach students writing skills as it motivates them to use their own imagination to explain what they are writing using well-structured steps. It engages students in the exploration of

a specific topic or concept while allowing them at the same time to use their creativity in presenting out of the box ideas stemming from their own imagination and creative skills to give the topic a unique perspective (Dani, Litchfield, & Hallman-Thrasher, 2018).

The RAFTs strategy is another instructional strategy developed by Santa and others (1988). It aims to provide assistance for students to better understand their role as writers, the audience they will address, the varied formats for writing, and the expected content. Porzel (2018) defined RAFT as an acronym for the role of the writer, and the audience, to whom you are writing, the format which the writing will take and the writing topic.

As for El Sourani (2017), RAFT as an instructional strategy includes four main components: The role of the writer (R), audience (A), written products format (F), and finally, the topic of the writing material (T). Simon (2012) believes that RAFT is able to help students realize their roles as creative writers in their creative writing assignments. It aids them to master effective ways they can use in presenting their points of view, express themselves in their quest to make their targeted audience more aware of their writing product. RAFT's writing strategy helps students to be more aware of the audience, and different formats in addition to the points and topics which they are going to mention.

Empirical Studies

Working in the Arab culture, Al Khasawneh (2014) examined the effect of using RAFT on developing female students spelling skills in the middle school. The sample of the study consisted of 33 female students. To verify the effectiveness of RAFT instructional strategy, a one group semi- experimental design was employed based on the use of a pre-post test using a multiple choice spelling achievement test was developed. The results of the study affirmed the effectiveness of RAFT instructional strategy in improving female students' spelling skills as there were statistically significant differences between students' pre-post test scores, in favor of post test.

In Saudi Arabia, Salameh (2016) investigated the effectiveness of RAFT instructional strategy on improving EFL university learners writing competency. The sample of the study totaled 45 first year university students selected randomly from one EFL writing course. The study used single group's semi- experimental design as the students in the study were taught writing competency skills using RAFT. To examine the effect of the instructional strategy, the students were asked to write paragraphs before and after the participation in the study. The results of the study indicated a significant improvement in students' writing competency due to RAFT instructional strategy employed in teaching writing skills. There were no gender differences in the effect of RAFT instructional strategy on students' writing competency.

In Palestine, El Sourani (2017) examined the effectiveness of RAFT instructional strategy on female 10th graders' English writing skills. The sample of the study consisted of 68 female students assigned evenly into two study groups; experimental consisting of 34 female students taught using RAFT and control consisting of 34 female students taught using the traditional teaching method. A semi- experimental design was employed based on the use of pre-post tests. The results of the study showed statistically significant differences in students' post test scores, in favor of experimental group students.

Since their introduction, RAFT was not fully examined by the different researchers, especially in EFL classes. RAFT was developed by (Santa & Others, 1988) to be used for teaching writing to improve students' writing skills in the various school stages.

2. Problem of the study

As an EFL teacher in the Jordanian public schools, the researcher has noticed that students in different school levels lack the necessary writing abilities. Also, they show an obvious weakness in this important language skill. It is evident that writing is one of the most difficult language skills in any given language; but this does not justify the fact that students suffer from a severe deficit in this skill. As such, there is a need to develop instructional strategies which should be able to address this weakness it can be argued that this instructional strategy may provide students with the appropriate skills in writing, especially creative writing. The study sought to examine the role of this strategy to develop the student's' creative writing, by answering the following question:

“Are there any significant differences at ($\alpha=0.05$) among the students' scores in the experimental and control group on the post creative writing test due to the teaching strategy (RAFT, and conventional)?”

3. Method and Procedures

The subjects of the study were purposefully chosen: fifty female eleventh grade students from Al Andalus Secondary School for Girls. They were distributed into two sections; each section consisted of 25 students. one comprised the control group and the other was the experimental group. The control group was taught conventionally as per the guidelines of the teacher's book whereas the experimental group was taught through RAFT strategy.

The present study adopted the quasi-experimental design in terms of using two experimental groups and one control group.

The instruments

The researcher used the following instruments in the study:

- a) A pre-post creative writing test was designed by the researcher to determine the effectiveness of RAFT.

b) Language Creativity Rubric: The researcher also applied Language Creativity Rubric which was prepared based on studies conducted by Torrance (1968–1990), Sternberg (1995a, 1995b, 1998) and Soh (1997). It consists of seven criteria which include: originality, fluency, flexibility, elaboration, richness of vocabulary, complexity of sentences and accuracy in grammar. The first four components were for assessing creativity, while the other three were components related to language proficiency, which were in this case, essential for assessing language mastery. They covered richness in vocabulary, complexity in sentence and accuracy in grammar (as cit. in Majid, Tan, & Soh, 2003).

Validity and Reliability of the creative writing Test

To ensure the validity of the content of the pre-post test and students and teachers guides, the jury was asked to examine the pre-post test. The percentage of jury in agreement was 85%. Some modifications were taken into consideration, as well as the time of some parts was modified to suit the nature of the activity.

In order to establish the reliability of the pre- creative writing test, the researcher piloted the same creative writing test on a group of 20 students from another section of the eleventh grade in the same school. They were not participants in the study. Reliability was measured by the test-retest formula using Pearson reliability coefficient.

Data Analysis

To answer the research question, means, standard deviations, adjusted means and T-Test were used.

4. Findings and Discussion

To answer the study question “Are there any significant differences at ($\alpha=0.05$) among the students’ scores in the experimental and control group on the post creative writing test due to the teaching strategy (RAFT, and conventional)?” T-Test was employed

Table1. Means and Standard deviations of each student scores in the pretest and posttest

	GROUP	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre total	Conventional	25	2.09	.755	.151
	RAFT	25	1.95	.959	.192
Post total	Conventional	25	2.58	.817	.163
	RAFT	25	3.39	.964	.193

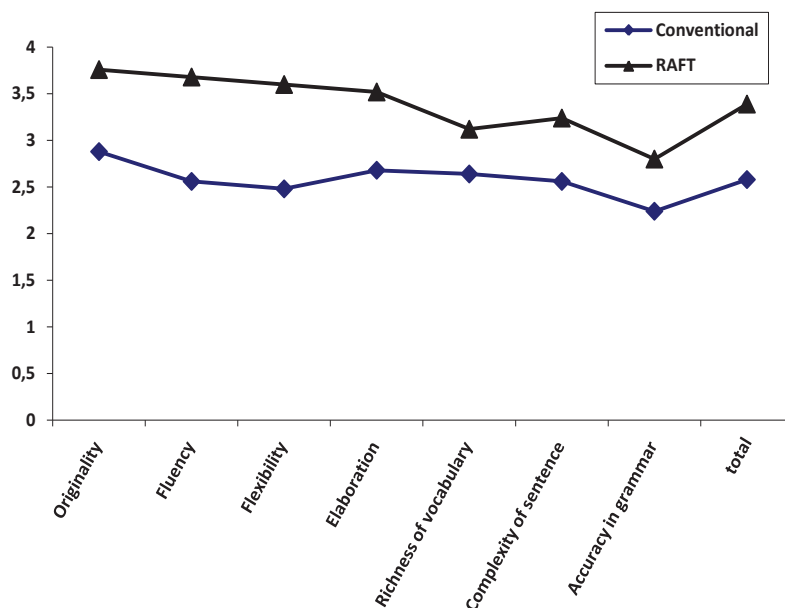
The table showed the differences in the performance of conventional and experimental groups on the creative writing pretest, indicating the similarity between

the two study groups. By contrast, the post test mean scores for the performance of students in the two study groups (conventional, experimental) as the mean scores for the conventional was ($M = 2.58$) while this was ($M = 3.39$) for the experimental group.

Table2. T-Test of the students' scores on the creative writing sub-skills on the pre and posttest due to the teaching strategy.

	GROUP	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Originality pre	Conventional	.955	48	.344
	RAFT			
Originality post	Conventional	-3.012	48	.004
	RAFT			
Fluency pre	Conventional	-.140	48	.889
	RAFT			
Fluency post	Conventional	-4.155	48	.000
	RAFT			
Flexibility pre	Conventional	-.413	48	.681
	RAFT			
Flexibility post	Conventional	-3.950	48	.000
	RAFT			
Elaboration pre	Conventional	-.526	48	.602
	RAFT			
Elaboration post	Conventional	-2.862	48	.006
	RAFT			
Richness of vocabulary pre	Conventional	1.443	48	.156
	RAFT			
Richness of vocabulary post	Conventional	-1.726	48	.091
	RAFT			
Complexity of sentence pre	Conventional	1.423	48	.161
	RAFT			
Complexity of sentence post	Conventional	-2.386	48	.021
	RAFT			
Accuracy in grammar pre	Conventional	1.153	48	.255
	RAFT			
Accuracy in grammar post	Conventional	-2.333	48	.024
	RAFT			
Pre total	Conventional	.538	48	.593
	RAFT			
Post total	Conventional	-3.211	48	.002
	RAFT			

As shown in table (2), it is evident that RAFT instructional strategy had a significant positive effect on the total skills of creative writing (flexibility, originality, fluency, elaboration) and on the other skills included in this study (richness of vocabulary, complexity of sentence, accuracy in grammar). For example, the means score of students' performance for originality was (.955), while it was (-3.012) for the posttest. Furthermore, the means score for students' performance in accuracy in grammar was (1.153) and for the post test it was (-2.333).



The second axis of the study showed the arithmetic mean, with a standard deviation higher than Fluency and at an average level. Flexibility – post, Elaboration – post, Richness of vocabulary- post at an average level. This confirms that the English Profilers as a foreign group, is the group on which RAFT has the greatest impact.

This result may be explained by claiming that RAFT is based on important practical assumptions, the most important is that it motivates students to use their imaginative skills before engaging in the writing tasks. Furthermore, RAFT is an instructional strategy which targets creating a learning environment giving students the opportunity to apply different rules in the writing process, to imagine themselves as writers able to produce high quality writing material. This indicates that such a strategy motivates students to be more immersed in the writing activity and this improves their creative writing skills.

In RAFT learning environment, learners control the flow of the learning content. They take the role of the writer, and they imagine the audience they are

writing to, developing the format in the writing process and use strong verbs, thus, they are motivated to be more creative since they are free to use the format they found comfortable. This gives them various options in the writing process, making them more creative. As Bandura (1997) stated, increasing learners' self-efficacy is a key factor for increasing creativity among learners. Also, learners promote their intrinsic motivation due to their control of the learning process since they feel more responsible of their own learning. They can select the pace of learning and progress as they wish while writing creatively.

The study result is consistent with El Sourani (2017) which showed statistically significant differences in students' post test scores, in favor of experimental group students. These results are also consistent with the results reported by Parilasanti, Suarnajaya and Marjohan (2014) study, indicating that RAFT was very effective in improving the writing competency of students.

Thus, EFL teachers are recommended to use RAFT to teach creative thinking skills and creative reading in different school levels. Further research examining the use of RAFT and its effect on higher education and middle school students' creative writing skills is also needed. Finally, TFL curricula developers should construct learning activities based on RAFT instructional strategy.

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