

Using Task-based Activities to Improve the Writing skills of Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract: This study investigated the effectiveness of online task-based activities on developing the writing skills of students with learning disabilities. This study employed the experimental design by developing a list of task-based activities and a pre-test and a post-test to measure students' level in writing before and after applying the strategy. The study included 65 students with LDs in the English language in Irbid city, Jordan. Two groups were formed from the sample; one was taught using task-based activities and the other was taught by the traditional method. The results showed an improvement in the performance of the experimental group in writing skills. The task-based activities proved to be effective in online education and can be used by teachers of LDs in the classroom as well. Finally, the study recommended providing training on the importance of task-based activities and conducting more studies on this topic.

Keywords: learning disabilities in English, task-based activities, writing skills.

1. Introduction

The concept of task-based activities is one of the effective strategies in teaching English writing skills. There has been disagreement between scholars on the definition of the concept of task-based activities. However, there is consensus that such activities should have three major elements, questions, input and specific procedures (Nunan, 2004). The task-based activities could include online activities that students can receive along with some instructions. The main purpose of using such activities is to strengthen the skills of investigation and cooperative learning environment. They can be used to treat and improve several language skills among learners. However, in this study the writing skill was selected to be tested along with this strategy.

Students face several challenges in learning writing skills in the classroom. There is a difference between the input they receive and the output they produce. Teachers also find it challenging to keep the writing levels of their students to the desired levels (Adas & Bakir, 2013). The task-based activities are widely used by teachers in several educational disciplines because of its efficiency and purposefulness.

2. Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine how students with learning disabilities in English language face several challenges in learning the different skills in the language. Writing is among the most difficult skills these students face.

3. Problem of the Study

The teaching methods used by teachers are either traditional do not match the students' levels and needs. Teachers should use recent teaching methods and techniques to help students with special needs to learn faster and better. Among these new methods are task-based activities, which are mostly provided online to students. However, after the spread of the current COVID-19 pandemic, most countries moved to online education. Teachers started to use different techniques to help their students. Therefore, this study investigated the impact of utilizing online task-based activities on developing the writing skills of students with learning disabilities in the city of Irbid, Jordan.

4. Question of the Study

To achieve the objectives of the study, the following question was formulated:

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1. Does the use of task-based activities affect the writing skills of students with learning disabilities before and after applying the task-based activities educational program?

5. Significance of the Study

It is hoped that this study will add to the literature on learning disabilities in the English language. It sheds light on the writing skill as a major skill that students need to acquire to master other subjects. The results of this study might help teachers to find optimal methods to teach writing skills to students with LDs. The results also might enrich the decision-making process in the educational circles to the appropriate techniques to use in online teaching and learning.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to students with LDs in the English language in the city of Irbid, Jordan. The results of the study are limited to the writing skills in English and the implementation of activities by teachers and students. The study was implemented in the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021.

7. Literature Review

Several studies explored the use of task-based activities in different contexts. Pham (2022) examined whether TBI affects students' abilities in speaking and writing skills. The use of task-based instruction (TBI) is very important in improving students' productive skills. Results of previous literature show that the TBI model had a significant impact on students' grammatical performance in terms of speaking and writing skills. English language teachers tend to use task-based instruction with different set of skills. This is because the grammar classes provided students with many opportunities to practice the language, and the students were motivated to participate in class activities.

Rodríguez et al., (2015) explored the writing process of students with and without disabilities. Student writing productivity was assessed using the Essay Contrast Task and the Writing Log which registered the process of writing an essay using seven categories. The results provide information on how children and adolescents with ADHD and WLD produce text and how much time they spend on different subtasks of writing. Notably, ADHD and WLD students spent much less time thinking and reviewing their written work than normal students, which negatively affected the coherence and quality of their writing.

Lee and De La Paz (2021) conducted a review of 14 high-quality studies to identify effective components of writing instruction for LD students, EL students, and at-risk learners generally. The study analyzed studies by objective, respondents, dependent variables, and instructions. The results showed that students who received structured cognitive instruction on text features showed significant growth in writing. Conversely, the language of science, distinct from the language of everyday life, does not exist in this literature. Our findings therefore provide insight into the cognitive and language support these students need and the implications for designing effective writing instruction. Sasayama and Izumi (2012) define such activities as important methods to improve students' ability to develop their skills in writing.

Writing is a difficult and important area of language that students struggle with, especially in the EFL context. Kassem (2017) mentioned that students around the world need to master this skill to survive in the academic field. For elaboration, students use English writing in other school courses and to prepare for assignments, as well as to communicate effectively.

E-learning offers challenges that are relevant to real-world environments. For example, instead of explaining the passive voice directly to the students, the teacher can tackle a full-fledged assignment that incorporates the passive voice into the students. Sariçoban and Karakurt (2016) suggest that task-based activities can stimulate both teachers and learners, encourage social interaction, knowledge sharing and interaction, and bridge the gaps in meaning that reflect real life. On the other hand, knowledge in many conventional classes is usually presented in a regular format that reduces any kind of interaction between subject subjects.

Şimşek and Bakir (2019) explored the use of task-centered activities in teaching Turkish as a second language. The study developed a suggested program and applied it to a sample of 12 students. The program focused on teaching phrases and idioms. The findings revealed that using task-based activities was effective in increasing students' skills in idioms and phrases.

There are several studies that tackled similar problem. Duong and Nguyen (2021) investigated the challenges faced by high school teachers of English when they implement the task-based teaching process. The study included 96 teachers working in Vietnam. The teachers responded to a questionnaire and participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings showed two types of challenges. These challenges were objective and subjective. The teachers expressed that class size and the curriculum level were among the major challenges.

Farizka et al (2020) investigated the learning engagement of students in writing classes, which use task-based learning. The study used the experimental design and observation in the classroom. The findings showed that among the major challenges is the misunderstanding of instructions by students during the performance and implementation of the activities. However, the findings revealed a positive impact of the task-based activities improving the writing levels of students.

Xue, S. (2020) designed a model based on mobile technology and integrated it with the task-based strategy to teach English as a second language. The theoretical dimensions of the mobile learning technologies were discussed and analyzed after conducting a systematic review of the literature. The study concluded that task-based strategy can be easily integrated into modern technologies to teach English language skills optimally.

Nashirova, S. B. (2021) explored the role of task-based activities in designing project work and increasing motivation to teaching and learning. The study implemented a series of tasks based on this strategy on a sample of EFL students. The findings revealed a positive impact of task-based activities in teaching and learning languages. The motivation of students also increased to design projects and work as teams.

8. Methods

The experimental approach was used in this study by developing a test of online task-based activities, which was applied to a group of students with learning disabilities to develop their writing skills. The pre-test and post-test were used to measure the students' levels.

The study covered students with LDs from the city of Irbid, Jordan. The number of students included in this study was 65 students from the fifth and sixth grades. The students were divided randomly into two groups; the experimental group (33 students) and the control group (32 students). These students were also enrolled in the resources room in the selected schools.

The study developed a test of task-based activities that could be implemented online using social media platforms. The pre/posttests were administered before the experiment to ensure its validity and reliability. The lists were applied to an exploratory sample of students other than those participating in the study. The list was then applied after two weeks of the first application to check its reliability. The two applications proved that the list is suitable for the purpose of the study. Posttests had different distributions of grades.

The validity of the instrument was obtained using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The total values ranged between (.803**-.977**) and all of them were statistically significant at the level of (0.01).

The target students were asked to read the paragraphs carefully and fill in the gaps using the information in the table. The student was asked to select two of her economic activities from the table and write a comparison paragraph that could simulate the economic activities of the first item.

9. Data Collection Process

Posttests were meticulously similar to pretests. However, the first item was 12 points (12 missing), the second item was 3 points, and the third item was 5 points. Grades have been redistributed to increase test reliability and validity. The first item was less likely to be subjective and biased. Therefore, it accounted for the majority of the overall grades.

10. Data analysis

A list of pre- and post-test activities was recorded and tabulated using the Social Science Statistics Package (SPSS). Various statistical techniques were used to achieve the main objectives of this study. Descriptive statistics included the mean, standard deviation, and frequency used to calculate the demographics of students with learning disabilities.

11. Results and discussion

Since the questions were directed at writing skills, the test was well suited to examine student development during learning. Pre/post tests were informative as they provided researchers with robust, numerical and descriptive data on participants' writing. To reinforce this, researchers received definite grades that indicated student development in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation, and other traits such as cohesion. Analyzing student work using text content analysis tools was also very important to understanding progress and improving test results.

Results of the pretest

Pre-test results provided the researchers with a first insight into a student's writing ability. Therefore, the following table

shows the means of the two groups for both tests.

Table 1. The mean scores of the pretests

Group	Mean score: question 1	Mean score: question 2	Mean score: question 3	Total (20)
Control	8.68	3.46	2.70	14.85
Experimental	9.27	3.13	2.34	14.77

Arguably, both groups exhibited average writing skills. The mean score for the control group students on the first question was (8.68), while for the experimental group it was (9.27). Because the amount of writing was very limited, the students were able to cope well with the tightly controlled writing assignments. In the second question, both groups of students performed poorly, indicating their weakness in this skill. Students also scored poorly and below average on the last question.

These findings agree with another studies Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Xue, S, 2020; Farizka et al, 2020; Şimşek & Bakir, 2019). These studies and the literature show the need to implement the task-based strategy to help students from different stages to improve their levels in the different writing skills, especially, writing.

Results of the posttest

Below, we analytically present the results of the post-test and compare them with the pre-test. As previously mentioned, Excel was used for listing and analyzing grades.

Table 2. The mean scores of the posttests

Group	Mean score: question 1	Mean score: question 2	Mean score: question 3	Total
Control	10.65	1.48	2.09	14.25
Experimental	11	2.12	2.59	15.66

Table 2 reveals clear differences in the scores of both groups in the posttest. The students in the control group got a mean score of (10.65) in the first question and the experimental group got (11). The experimental group scores (2.12) in the second question, which is higher than the score of the control group who scored (1.48). In the third question, the mean score for the control group was (2.09) and for the experimental was (2.59). The total mean scores indicated that task-based activities have a positive impact on the students' performance in writing skills.

These findings agree with other studies conducted in the same field (Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Xue, S, 2020; Şimşek & Bakir, 2019). These studies showed that task-based strategy is useful for students with different stages and levels. The findings showed the weakness of students in the writing skill. The students with LDs are the most affected group in the educational process. Teachers should pay attention to using appropriate methods to help such category.

12. Conclusion

This study explored the use of task-based instruction and its role in developing the writing skills of students with learning disabilities. The study concluded that the paragraphs produced by the experimental group were well punctuated. On the other hand, students in the control group did not use punctuation marks in their writings. Students in the experimental group produced better output in terms of the number of words in their writings. Others left most test objects blank. The experimental group used the verb tenses correctly and in an efficient way better than the students in the control group. Students in the experimental group also were able to use the forms of capital letters and transition words. However, other groups have written separate works that have not conveyed a coherent message.

13. Recommendations

The study recommends using the task-based activities strategy in teaching English to students with learning disabilities. It is also recommended to provide training programs on the use of this strategy to teachers of the English language. The study recommends conducting other studies on other samples from other educational stages to compare the results.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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