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Abstract

Active learning, initially proven effective in diverse academic and educational environments, only recently gained recognition within EFL pedagogy. Initially confined to the development of oral skills in EFL classrooms, its broader applicability has been underexplored. This research investigates the influence of active learning (AL) techniques on the writing skills of university students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Using a quasi-experimental approach, this study applied a one-group pretest-posttest design to assess the writing proficiency of the students prior to and subsequent to the incorporation of AL methodologies within the EFL writing syllabus. The results demonstrated marked improvements in the average scores of the students from the initial pretest to the concluding posttest after they engaged in sessions of AL-focused cooperative learning. Notably, improvements were observed across all six assessed components of writing: vocabulary, structure, mechanics, cohesion, organization, and development, underscoring the effectiveness of AL in fostering substantial gains in EFL writing performance.

Keywords: Active Learning, EFL writing, writing performance, writing skill.

Introduction

Despite the fact that EFL students are required to write essays and reports since their first year at the university level, academic writing has always been a daunting task for them. The complexity of the writing process, coupled with the stringent requirements of academic compositions such as the use of sophisticated English vocabulary, precision and efficacy in language, adherence to referencing and formatting standards, logical reasoning, style conventions, and the application of critical thinking skills, significantly contributes to the challenges of mastering writing skills (Bailey, 2011).

Furthermore, the propensity for committing errors adds another layer of difficulty for EFL students, with a substantial number making frequent mistakes in their writing (Hinkel, 2004). Additionally, the struggle to attain proficiency in EFL writing among students may also be attributed to the pedagogical approaches employed by educators, who often prefer traditional lecture-based teaching over more interactive and engaging methods like collaborative and active learning (Faust and Paulson, 1998). Despite the demonstrated success of active learning across various fields, it remains underutilized by university writing instructors. This article, therefore, explores the potential enhancements to students' writing abilities through the application of active learning techniques in EFL writing courses.

2.EFL Writing

Writing is a pivotal skill throughout the educational journey, from primary school to university and beyond, holding significant sway in both personal and academic growth. Its importance is equally recognized for first language (L1) learners and second/foreign language (SL/FL) learners, making the acquisition of writing skills a critical focus across educational levels. The growing emphasis on writing is due to its profound influence on academic achievement and future professional success. Shangraphan and Mamipour (2011) emphasized the necessity of writing proficiency for pursuing advanced education, arguing that without such skills, higher educational pursuits remain elusive.

Similarly, Hosseini et al. (2013) noted that writing skills serve as essential tools for disseminating knowledge, particularly in academic contexts, and that the ability to express oneself clearly can significantly

enhance one's life opportunities (p.10). Consequently, having strong writing abilities enhances academic achievement and significantly influences career development opportunities.

3. Active Learning

Active learning, deeply rooted in constructivist theories, emphasizes the necessity for students to form their own understanding of content. This student-centered approach is further supported by social constructivist theory, which prioritizes learner involvement and views interaction as crucial to the educational process (Al-Shihri, 2019). Active learning typically refers to teaching methods that actively involve students in their learning journey. Specifically, this instructional approach engages students in group activities and necessitates the application of advanced cognitive skills to accomplish learning tasks or actively participate in classroom discussions and exercises (Freeman et al, 2014).

According to Young (2018), the fundamental principle of AL is learning through discovery, i.e, making students responsible for their own learning and discovering knowledge themselves. Consequently, this would foster students' creativity and increase their analytical and problem solving skills. Accordingly, within the AL pedagogy, students are considered initiators, who do meaningful actions during the learning sessions and developers, who are responsible for developing their skills through the learning process (Mellis, 2012).

In such environments, students take charge of their learning, while instructors act as facilitators, creating a dynamic and supportive educational atmosphere that involves all learners in the process. Active learning involves a spectrum of cooperative and participatory activities, including project presentations, demonstrations, self-directed learning, quizzes, discussion groups, journaling and portfolio building, cues during interactive lectures, field excursions, collaborative authorship, debates, and educational games (Young, 2018; Gholani et al, 2014). Hence, via accomplishing such tasks students are engaged in deep rather than surface learning, which will enable them to remember, reinvest and transfer the learned content more efficiently.

Engaging EFL students in active learning activities such as role plays, simulations, classroom discussions, group writing, educative games has a significant impact on students' academic achievement and contributes to the enhancement of their problem solving, social and critical thinking skills. Besides, it also raises students' interest and motivation towards learning the targeted content (Hanson and Moser, 2003 ; Devira, 2020). Momani et al. (2016) note that applying active learning in language classrooms significantly advances English language teaching and student performance overall.

4. The Study

The study was conducted to examine the effects of active learning on the writing competencies of EFL students at a specific institution, namely the English Department of the Higher Normal School of Ouargla in Algeria. Further details on the objectives, setting, and participants of this study are elaborated in the following sections.

4.1 The Objective of the Research

The primary goal of this investigation is to analyze the impact of active learning strategies on the writing abilities of EFL students in a classroom setting. This includes assessing improvements in the areas of organization, development, cohesion, structure, vocabulary, and mechanics following student participation in active learning-based writing activities.

4.2 The Research Question

To achieve the aims of this research, the primary question addressed is:

Does the application of active learning strategies in EFL writing course positively influence the students' writing performance?

4.3. The Research Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the application of active learning methods in the EFL writing curriculum will positively affect the students' writing performance.

4.4 The Participants

This investigation involved second-year undergraduates from the English Department at the Higher Normal School in Ouargla, Algeria. The cohort included 30 EFL learners (6 males and 24 females), chosen for convenience. These students had no prior exposure to active learning methods and had received instruction in writing primarily through conventional lecturing in their first year.

5. Methods and Tools

The aim of this investigation was to determine the beneficial impacts of active learning strategies on the writing skills of EFL students. The research utilized a quasi-experimental single-group pretest-posttest design. It was organized into three primary phases: an initial pretest to gauge the students' foundational writing skills, a two-week intervention period featuring active learning activities, and a final posttest to assess any improvements in writing capabilities.

6. The Research Procedures

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of active learning methods in boosting the writing abilities of EFL students. The approach included several stages:

6.1 The writing Tests

The evaluation of students' writing performance was based on writing tests conducted before and after the

AL intervention. Initially, students completed a pre-test, writing a descriptive essay of approximately 180 words within ninety minutes, to assess their writing skills in terms of organization, development, cohesion, structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. Following a two-week AL intervention, a similar post-test was administered. The essays were evaluated using Paulus's (1999) scoring rubric, which provides a comprehensive method for assessing writing both globally and locally (Lundstorm and Baker, 2009).

6.2 The Active Learning Treatment

After the preliminary pre-test, students underwent a two-week active learning sequence. During this period, students performed writing activities in collaborative groups of four, adopting a process-oriented writing methodology that includes stages of pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing. The initial meetings were dedicated to educating students on effective collaboration within groups. By the third session, participants progressed to composing essays utilizing the process writing technique. The organization of these sessions unfolded as follows:

6.2.1 The Pre-writing stage

During this initial phase, students were grouped to brainstorm, plan, and outline their essays on a given topic collaboratively. A variety of active learning strategies were employed across these sessions to enhance student interest in the topic and foster effective participation in group tasks. Techniques such as Round Table, Two Stay and Two Stray, Buzz Groups, Think-Pair-Share, and Roving Reporter were used to encourage students to engage actively, voice their opinions, and discuss essay topics in a supportive classroom environment.

6.2.2 The Drafting Stage

In this phase, students transitioned to individual work. They utilized the ideas and plans formulated during the pre-writing stage to start composing their essays. During the drafting phase, students were encouraged to write their essays continuously from start to finish, deferring error correction and revisions to subsequent stages.

6.2.3 The Revising Stage

Post-drafting, students revisited their essays collectively. The focus during this revising stage was on improving content and organization, such as restructuring sentences or paragraphs, enriching the text with suitable vocabulary, and integrating additional relevant details. Feedback from peers played a crucial role, prompting students to produce second drafts based on the collective input received.

6.2.4 The Editing Stage

In the final step of the writing process, termed editing, students collaboratively refined their peers' drafts by addressing grammatical inaccuracies and mechanical problems. This stage involved exchanging drafts and providing constructive feedback on one another's contributions. Subsequent to this peer review, students completed their essays for submission to the teacher.

After completing the two-week active learning intervention, which included three sessions per week, students undertook a post-test to evaluate the effectiveness of the AL treatment and to determine if there was a notable enhancement in their writing abilities post-intervention.

7. Results and Discussion

To assess the impact of the independent variable, active learning, on the dependent variable, writing proficiency, the researcher employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics were utilized to evaluate the students' writing performance during the initial and final tests, while inferential statistics were used to compare the results from these assessments, particularly focusing on the average scores to detect significant improvements in writing proficiency after the active learning sessions. The statistical analysis for both datasets was conducted using SPSS version 19.

7.1 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were utilized to evaluate any progress in students' writing performance across pre-test and post-test assessments.

7.1.1 The Pre-test Results

The initial compositions of the students were assessed using the scoring rubric developed by Paulus (1999), which evaluates six key elements of writing: organization, development, cohesion, structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. Each element is scored out of ten, with a maximum possible total of 60 points. This scoring system was selected because it efficiently captures essential facets of students' writing proficiency. After the essays were evaluated and scored, the results were compiled and are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' Pre-test Mean Scores

Writing Categories	N	Mean scores	SD
Organization	30	2.30	1.02
Development	30	2.27	0.91
Cohesion	30	3.67	1.06
Structure	30	3.33	0.96
Vocabulary	30	3.70	1.29
Mechanics	30	3.47	1.01
Overall writing Performance	30	18.73	2.99

Table 1 illustrates that the students' writing skills were relatively weak, as indicated by an average writing performance score of 18.73, which falls below the midpoint score of 30. The standard deviation of 2.99 suggests a homogeneity among the students, revealing that they share a common deficiency in writing proficiency. Notably, the writing elements that scored the lowest were organization (Mean = 2.30, Standard Deviation = 1.02) and development (Mean = 2.27, Standard Deviation = 0.91).

7.1.2 The Post-test Results

The outcomes of post-test, conducted subsequent to two-week period of active learning sessions, are depicted in table 2 below.

Table 2. Students' Post-test Mean Scores

Writing Categories	N	Mean scores	SD
Organization	30	3.53	1.01
Development	30	3.33	0.88
Cohesion	30	5.13	1.11
Structure	30	6.73	0.87
Vocabulary	30	6.20	0.85
Mechanics	30	6.67	0.92
Overall writing Performance	30	31.60	2.34

The post-test results presented in table 2 above show that students scored higher in the post-test in all the assessed writing components. Concerning the highest scores, they were recorded in the writing mechanics (M= 6.67, SD= 0.92) and structure (M= 6.73, SD= 0.87). As for the overall writing mean score, it was 31.6 with a 2.34 SD value, which reflects an improvement in students' writing performance. Accordingly, so as to investigate whether the enhancement of student's writing level is statistically significant, inferential statistics (paired-samples t-test) are performed.

7.2 Inferential Statistics

Following a detailed analysis of the students' writing performances in the initial and final tests, inferential statistics were employed to assess if there was a statistically significant improvement in students' writing abilities after implementing active learning strategies into the writing curriculum. To achieve this, a paired samples t-test was carried out using SPSS version 19. The results of this analysis are depicted in Tables 3 to 9.

7.2.1 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Writing Organization

To evaluate the effect on writing organization, a paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the organizational scores from the initial test to the final test. The results are summarized below.

Table 3. Paired-samples t-test for Pre-test and Post-test Organization Scores

Organization	N	M	SD	M D	df	T	P
Pre-test	30	2.30	1.02	1.23	29	9.28	0.000
Post-test	30	3.53	1.01				

Table 3 shows that the average organizational score in the pre-test was 2.30, which rose to 3.53 in the post-test, indicating an average gain of 1.23. The t-test results, $t(29) = 9.28$, $p < 0.000$, verify a statistically significant enhancement in students' organizational skills in writing after the intervention.

7.2.2 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Writing Development

The paired samples t-test conducted to compare the scores on writing development from the pre-test to the post-test provided the following results.

Table 4. Paired-samples t-test for Pre-test and Post-test Development Scores

Development	N	M	SD	M D	df	T	P
Pre-test	30	2.27	0.91	1.07	29	11.27	0.000
Post-test	30	3.33	0.88				

Table 4 shows that pre-test mean score was 2.27, which rose to 3.33 in post-test, reflecting a mean difference of 1.07. The substantial statistical difference, with $t(29) = 11.27$ and $p < 0.000$, indicates significant enhancement in students' writing development following the AL intervention.

7.2.3 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Writing Cohesion

Comparative results of students' pre-test and post-test scores for the cohesion aspect are presented below.

Table 5. Paired-samples t-test for Pre-test and Post-test Cohesion Scores

Cohesion	N	M	SD	M D	df	T	P
Pre-test	30	3.67	1.06	1.47	29	9.33	0.000
Post-test	30	5.13	1.11				

Table 5 indicates that the average cohesion score increased from 3.67 in the pre-test to 5.13 in the post-test, with an improvement of 1.47. The t-test results, $t(29) = 9.33$ with a p-value < 0.000 , demonstrate a statistically significant enhancement, confirming that the students' ability to write cohesively has significantly improved following participation in the active learning (AL) sessions.

7.2.4 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Writing Structure

Students' t-test results of writing structure aspect are displayed in table 6 below.

Table 6. Paired-samples t-test for pre-test and post-test structure scores

Structure	N	M	SD	M D	df	T	P
Pre-test	30	3.33	0.96	3.40	29	14.91	0.000
Post-test	30	6.73	0.87				

As shown in Table 6, the average score for the structural aspect of writing escalated from 3.33 in pre-test to 6.73 in post-test, reflecting a notable increase of 3.40. This marked elevation in mean scores across the evaluations indicates that students demonstrated significant progress in their grasp of writing structure as a result of their involvement in the AL sessions.

7.2.5 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Writing Vocabulary

Regarding the vocabulary aspect, the findings from the paired-samples t-test are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Paired-samples t-test for Pre-test and Post-test Vocabulary Scores

Vocabulary	N	M	SD	M D	df	T	P
Pre-test	30	3.70	1.29	2.50	29	8.48	0.000
Post-test	30	6.20	0.85				

Table 7 illustrates that the vocabulary scores increased from an average of 3.70 in the pre-test to 6.20 in the post-test, marking a substantial gain of 2.50. The t-value $(29) = 8.48$ and a p-value below 0.000 indicate that this significant increase is statistically meaningful, highlighting a considerable enhancement in vocabulary mastery following the AL intervention.

7.2.6 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Writing Mechanics

The final component assessed in students' writing was mechanics, and the outcomes are detailed below.

Table 8. Paired-samples t-test for Pre-test and Post-test Mechanics Scores

Mechanics	N	M	SD	M D	df	T	P
Pre-test	30	3.47	1.01	3.20	29	15.55	0.000
Post-test	30	6.67	0.92				

Data from Table 8 reveal that the average score for writing mechanics escalated from 3.47 in the pre-test to 6.67 in the post-test, reflecting a significant rise of 3.20. With a t-value of 15.55 and a p-value less than 0.000, these results point to a profound improvement in students' proficiency with writing mechanics after their engagement with the active learning strategies implemented in the EFL writing curriculum.

7.2.7 Comparison of Students' Pre-test and Post-test Overall Writing Performance

After thorough examination of each individual component, the collective writing proficiency of the students, evaluated using a paired-samples t-test, is documented in Table 9.

Table 9. Paired-samples t-test for Overall Writing

Overall writing Performance	N	M	SD	M D	Df	T	P
Pre-test	30	18.73	2.99	12.87	29	19.18	0.000
Post-test	30	31.60	2.34				

Figure (1): Students' pre-test and post-test overall writing performance scores

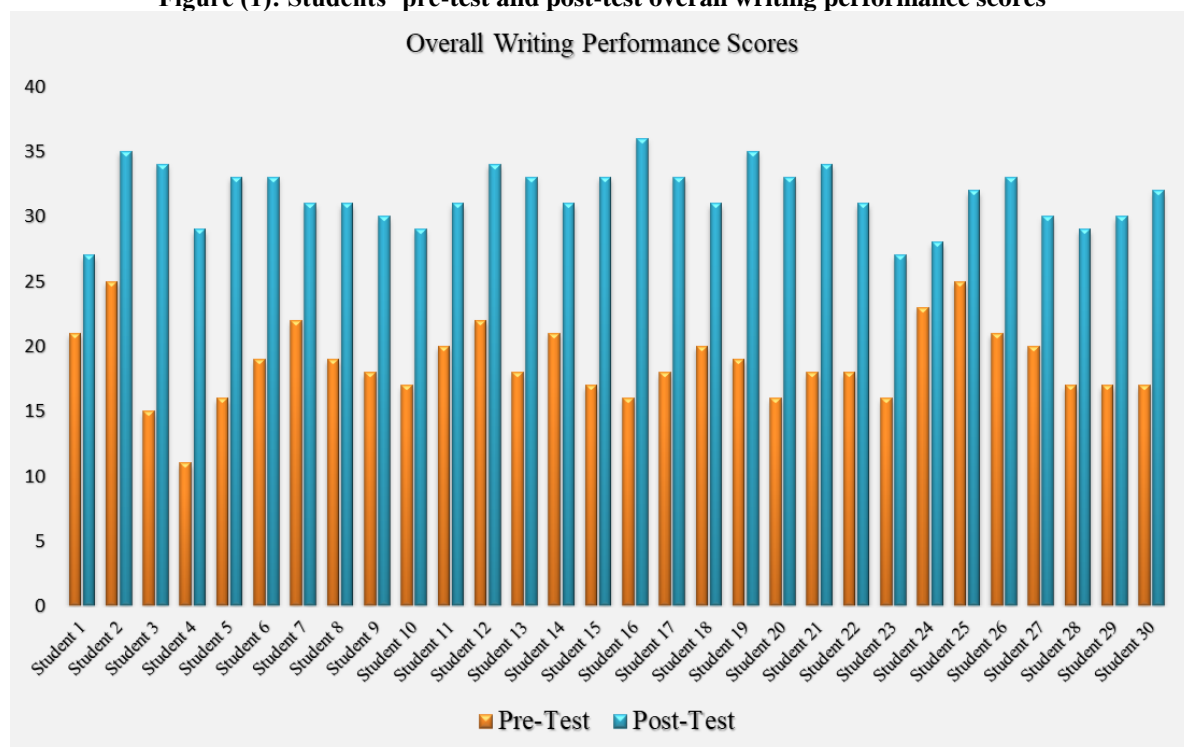


Table 9 displays data showing that the average comprehensive score for writing performance rose from 18.73 in the pre-test to 30.60 in the post-test, marking a significant increase of 12.87. Figure 1 supports this finding by indicating that every student, without exception, achieved higher scores in the post-test, underlining the widespread success of the AL interventions. With a t-value of 19.18 and a p-value below 0.000, the marked difference between the scores of the pre-test and post-test clearly demonstrates that the incorporation of active learning markedly enhanced the overall writing abilities of students in the EFL writing course.

7.3 Interpretation of Results

After engaging in the active learning sessions, students exhibited enhanced skills in structuring and elaborating on their essays. They crafted essays that were more logically connected, and there was a discernible decrease in grammatical errors. The review of data from the post-test compositions revealed marked improvements across all six evaluated aspects of writing, though the degree of enhancement varied among these aspects.

The comparison of average scores from the pre-test and post-test indicated that the most significant advances were observed in essay structure and mechanics, with notable improvements also seen in vocabulary and cohesion. Conversely, the least improvement was observed in the organization and development components.

Hence, it is evident that active learning was particularly effective in enhancing students' writing precision (structure and mechanics) and lexical choices (vocabulary). However, while there was some enhancement in how students organized and developed their essays, these improvements were modest compared to gains in other areas, suggesting that active learning was less effective at aiding students in effectively organizing and developing their essays.

8. Conclusion

This study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of active learning in improving writing competencies among EFL students. A quasi-experimental, single-group pretest-posttest design was utilized for this analysis. The findings from data analysis confirmed that active learning positively impacted students' writing skills, particularly in vocabulary, structure, mechanics, and cohesion. However, it was less successful in significantly improving

students' abilities in writing organization and development.

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