

The Effect of DEFENDS Strategy on Iraqi EFL Preparatory School Students' Writing Performance

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Date Received : 17/5/2026

Date of Acceptness : 9/6/2026

Abstract

Many Iraqi EFL teachers face problems in teaching writing skill and this led to almost neglecting such an important skill in their everyday lessons. As a result, students grew weak at writing performance, and thus the teachers give their students ready compositions , without letting their students try to write. However, this study aims at finding out the effect of DEFENDS strategy on EFL students' writing performance. The research design is a quasi-experimental nonrandomized . Pre-Post test is used as an instrument .Two groups are randomly selected from the fifth preparatory grade in AL-OUloom Preparatory School for Boys for the academic year (2025-2026) to represent the sample of the study which includes (62) students. The experimental group of 3\ students is taught writing using the DEFENDS Strategy, whereas the control group of 3\ students is taught writing skill using the traditional manner. Both groups take a writing post-test at the conclusion of the experiment. The study's findings demonstrate a statistically significant difference in writing performance between the experimental and control groups. Compared to the control group, the experimental group outperformed it. In light of the obtained results, recommendations for more research and teaching strategies are finally provided.

Keywords: DEFENDS Strategy, writing performance, types of writing performance.

أثر استراتيجية DEFENDS على أداء مهارة الكتابة لدى طلاب المدارس الإعدادية دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

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تاريخ الاستلام : ٢٠٢٦/٥/١٧

تاريخ قبول النشر : ٢٠٢٦/٦/٩

ملخص البحث

يواجه العديد من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق صعوبات في تدريس مهارة الكتابة، مما أدى إلى إهمال هذه المهارة الأساسية في دروسهم اليومية. ونتيجة لذلك، تراجع أداء الطلاب في الكتابة، ولذا يُعطي المعلمون طلابهم نصوصاً جاهزة دون إتاحة الفرصة لهم للكتابة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة أثر استراتيجية "الدفاع" (DEFENDS) على أداء طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الكتابة. اعتمدت الدراسة تصميمًا شبه تجريبي غير عشوائي، واستخدمت اختبارًا قبلًا وبعديًا كأداة لجمع البيانات. تم اختيار مجموعتين عشوائيًا من طلاب الصف الخامس الإعدادي في مدرسة العلوم الإعدادية للبنين للعام الدراسي ٢٠٢٥-٢٠٢٦ لتمثيل عينة الدراسة التي بلغ عددها 62 طالبًا. تلقت المجموعة التجريبية، المكونة من ٣١ طالبًا، تدريبًا على الكتابة باستخدام استراتيجية "الدفاع"، بينما تلقت المجموعة الضابطة، المكونة من ٣١ طالبًا أيضًا، تدريبًا على الكتابة بالطريقة التقليدية. خضعت المجموعتان لاختبار كتابي بعدي في نهاية التجربة. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة وجود فرق ذي دلالة إحصائية في أداء الكتابة بين المجموعتين التجريبية والضابطة. بالمقارنة مع المجموعة الضابطة، تفوقت المجموعة التجريبية عليها. وفي ضوء النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها، تم تقديم توصيات لمزيد من البحث واستراتيجيات التدريس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجية الدفاع، أداء الكتابة، أنواع أداء الكتابة

Introduction

Writing is considered as a crucial skill in English for it is not just a necessary academic talent but also one that can be applied to any career field, including business, science, and technology, writing is a crucial English language proficiency. According to Dorobat (2007), writing is a way for a person to explore and work through their thoughts as well as to record, assimilate, and reformulate knowledge.

According to Harmer (2007), teaching writing is an interactive process in which the instructor explains technical aspects of writing to the students. Teachers must foster a creative writing habit. For this reason, the instructor must assist students in developing a writing habit so that they can practice and develop writing skill as an essential component of classroom instruction and approach writing assignments with the same zeal as they do other activities.

With any luck, the instructor will be able to assist the pupils in meeting the requirements of having a strong capacity to construct coherent phrases and paragraphs. A writer must become proficient in all parts of writing in order to produce well-organized work. According to Brown (2004) Content, structure, vocabulary, syntax, and mechanics are the five components of writing.

Teachers must use a method, technique, or plan because there are instances in which students are unable to generate well-written phrases and paragraphs, even when they are capable of doing so. The teacher's improper teaching style, technique, and strategy may be the reason behind students' poor writing abilities. In order to teach writing skills in the classroom, teachers should be more inventive in developing and implementing suitable and engaging methods, techniques, or strategies. The most significant factor influencing students' writing abilities is this.

Accordingly, there is a need to investigate the effectiveness of a new teaching strategy to develop WP. The DEFENDS strategy, one of several ones that English teachers might use to teach writing in the classroom, is used in this study. DEFENDS, which includes determine, estimate, figure, express, note, drive, and search, is one of those tactics. One method for defending a position in writing is DEFENDS. The steps that students will take in this strategy are as follows: (1) choose a theme and goals; (2) estimate main ideas and details; (3) determine the best order of main ideas and details; (4) express the theme in the first sentence; (5) note each main idea and supporting points; (6) emphasize the message in the final sentence; and (7) look for mistakes and fix them (Bisland, 2004).

The DEFENDS strategy, as elucidated by Catherine Collier (2017) in her book, serves several purposes: to aid learners in articulating a specific stance in written assignments, enhance writing tactics, streamline the writing process, and fortify the acquisition of writing skills.

AIMS

The study aims at finding out the effect of DEFENDS strategy on Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' writing performance

LIMITS

The study is limited to:

- Iraqi preparatory school students, 5th stage.
- Writing activities in the prescribed textbook 'English for Iraq' for 5th stage.
- The academic year 2025-2026.

Hypothesis

To achieve the aim of this study, the following null hypotheses have been tested:

1-There is no statistical significant difference between the mean score of the experimental group students who are taught writing by DEFENDS strategy and that of the control group students who are taught writing traditionally in the writing performance post-test.

Literature Review

DEFENDS strategy

A strategy for defending a position in writing is called DEFENDS (Ellis, 1989, 1990, 1993). The term DEFENDS stands for Decide, Estimate, Figure, Express, Note, Drive, and Search. According to Catherine Collier's (2016) book, the DEFENDS strategy serves a number of functions, including assisting students in defending a certain stance in a written assignment, enhancing writing techniques, facilitating the writing process, and strengthening the acquisition of writing skills. The strategy's seven steps are represented by the DEFENDS mnemonic.

Students must first choose their writing objectives and themes. This entails taking into account the audience as well as the kind of information that will be conveyed. Students are urged to put these objectives on paper. Second, students must come up with a minimum of two key concepts that bolster the essay's overall thesis. These major points should be followed by at least three supporting details. Third, after noting the key concepts and specifics, students should evaluate their observations to ascertain the optimal sequence for these elements in the article.

The sequence of the items should make sense and improve the paper's overall flow. Students are now prepared to go from prewriting to actually writing their essay or paper (Ellis, 1993). Students are encouraged to express their full idea in the first line in the following phase. Fifth, students proceed with their essay by delving into the key ideas and specifics they outlined in their prewriting. These ought to be in full sentences and adhere to the logical sequence decided upon during preparation. In the final phrase of the essay, students are instructed to restate their whole theme in the sixth stage. The essential idea should be summarized in a different way than in the first sentence. In the seventh and final step, students should use editing techniques to look for mistakes. These include rereading the essay to make sure it makes sense, checking for proper spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and examining the theme's overall clarity.

There must be benefits and drawbacks to every strategy. According to Collier (2016), DEFENDS has certain benefits as follows: First benefit: help students defend a specific stance in a written assignment; The second benefit is that it makes writing easier and enhances writing techniques; the third benefit is that it increases awareness of proper cognitive academic language; Building and enhancing awareness of the learning process is the fourth benefit. Developing analytical skills is the fifth advantage; developing autonomous field skills is the sixth.

The seventh benefit is the development of problem-solving, planning, and thinking skills; The eighth benefit is the development of academic transfer skills; The ninth benefit is to develop

academic topic knowledge, enhance content memory, and reinforce content courses; Enhancing students' capacity to prioritize and arrange knowledge is the tenth benefit; promote language development as the eleventh benefit; The twelfth benefit increase and enhance understanding; The thirteenth benefit is a decrease in locus of control confusion. The fourteenth benefit is that it makes it easier to talk about what's going on.

Writing Performance (WP)

Writing Performance is "the way language is actually put together" (Brown ,2015, p. 438). The processes of achieving writing practices are known as WP (Wehmeier, 2001). Furthermore, WP is defined as : "what students really accomplish when given writing assignments" (Abu Jalil ,2001, p. 107).

Kinds of Classroom Writing Performance

There are five types of WP as follows:

1. Mechanical or Imitative Writing

Students "write down" English letters, words, and short sentences at the beginning writing level in order to master the fundamentals of the orthographic code. Nowadays, a wide range of teaching methods are employed.

- Recognition Techniques: Beginner readers sometimes struggle to recognize letter qualities, and writers have a same fundamental skill. Explore about the different letters, match letters and words, circle whatever you come across, and match capital and lowercase letters. (Brown ,2015)

- Copying Writing by hand is a cognitive, kinesthetic, and psychomotor skill. Even if kids are able to recognize the differences between letters, they may find it difficult to generate them. As a result, copying is an outdated but useful exercise when used sparingly. Some claim that the emergence of digital keyboarding technologies is making handwriting a lost art. For many years to come, handwriting will surely remain a common way of writing.

- sound-spelling practice: a basic writing skill which is applicable to every alphabetical writing system is phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence. Learners whose first language is nonalphabetic (Chinese, Japanese, etc.) may find a new system challenging, but first studies on the crosslinguistic effect showed that "little" differences between L1 and L2 could be just as problematic as significant differences. Because of this, a Spanish L1 speaker can have more trouble learning English as a L2 than one may anticipate.
- dictation: is a useful method for honing grammar and discourse components while also practicing sound-spelling correspondences. Typically, a teacher will read a short paragraph aloud, reread it in sections, pause for students to write down what they hear, read it a third time, and then check the accuracy of their answers. (Brown ,2015)

Controlled or Intensive Writing

Writing is occasionally used as a productive modality to teach, reinforce, or test grammatical concepts. Written grammar drills are where this kind of concentrated writing is most frequently observed. This kind of writing never allows for much, if any, creativity occurs on by the author. One well known kind of controlled writing involves giving pupils a paragraph that requires them to change a particular structure throughout. For instance, they might be required to switch all verbs in the present tense to the past tense; in this scenario, the text's other temporal references might also need to be altered. While offering a range of stimuli,

guided writing lessens the teacher's control. To encourage pupils to share a story they recently seen on videotape, a teacher can, for instance, pose the following series of questions: What is the story's setting? Describe the primary character ,How does he respond to a person in a vehicle? another type of controlled writing is a dictocomp. A student is asked to restate a paragraph using his best memory of the reading after it has been read aloud two or three times at a regular pace. After reading the text, the teacher uses one of the many variations of the dictocomp approach to put important words from the paragraph in order on the white board as signs for pupils. (Brown ,2004)

Self-writing

An important portion of classroom writing might be self-writing, or writing by only oneself as an audience. Note-taking, which means that students take notes while in a lesson period to recall it later, is an obvious example of this type in classrooms. The books margins, digital note and highlight, entries of portfolio, and blank notebooks saved to later on use are additional locations to take notes. This also includes writing in a journal or diary. A conversation notebook, which a student writes down thoughts, emotions, and reactions and that a teacher reads and responds to, is having double audiences in a lot of conditions, even though it is technically created for oneself.

Display Writing

As mentioned before, writing is a life style within the educational curriculum framework Every language learner will have a display component for research assignments, essay tests, and short answer questions. A range of display writing techniques is the academic talents that bound ESL academically students' need to acquire.

Real Writing

It's the actual messages to one's audience. However, all classroom assignments for writing contain display writing. Actually, there are three subcategories as follows illustrating how reality could be introduced:

- Academic: writing exercise may exist in the group problem-solving ones where material is shared and actively sought out, specially if there are some topics that are considered as disciplinary and important one. peer editing is an important technique that allows learners real writing period and magnify their audience.
- Vocational/Technical: Real writing can take many different forms in schools where students are learning a FL for personal growth. It is possible to write actual letters, offer real directions for a specific task or assembly, and fill out real documents. These chances are significantly greater in profession language exercise, when a FL is provided within businesses and companies.
- Personal: Almost any FL course can incorporate diaries, letters, postcards, notes, private messages, and other informal writing, particularly in an interactive classroom. Meaningful information sharing can occur even though some jobs could be a little impromptu. (Brown ,2004)

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample of the Study

According to Mills and Gay (2019), a population is any gathering of a recognized group of people or non-human elements like objects, institutions, time, units, etc. Preparatory students in Iraq during the 2025–2026 academic year make up the study's population. Hence, the sample is chosen at random from fifth preparatory class. Additionally, it is split into two groups: 31 students from the control group and 31 from experimental group. Each group is selected at random from the Dewanyah Governorate's fifth prep class school. The following tables demonstrate how these two groups are equivalent based on the students' WP pre-test level and their prior year's scores:

Table (1) Table 3.1:the Sample

Study Groups	Sections	No. of students
Exp. grp	A	31
Con. grp	C	31

Table (2) Experimental Design

Group	Test Type	independent Variable	Test Type
Exp. grp	pre test	DEFENDS strategy	post test
Con. grp	pre test	traditional procedures	post test

Instrument of the Study

Writing Performance Test (WPT)

An emotive writing test is used to gauge the WP of students in EFL preparatory schools. According to Celce-Murcia et al. (2014) , this type of test focuses on writing about personal experiences in letters or emails to friends. As a result, the students are instructed to write on a recent movie they viewed. Organization, spelling, grammar, punctuation, style and expression quality are five elements that make up the WPT rating system. These elements range in level from five to o.

Face Validity of the Post –test

To make sure they are appropriate for the study, a team of trained experts examines the emotional writing test, the Control Group and Experimental Group lesson plans, and the scoring system. The majority of experts concur that the grading rubric and questions are helpful instruments for evaluating speaking abilities. This indicates that all responders (100%) think the pre-test and post-test are genuine.

Pilot Administration of the Post-test

McDonough (2011) defines it as a method of gathering sufficient information on item functioning in order to collect test forms, or it addresses any issues or problems with the test's application well before the actual test.(40) Iraqi EFL fifth-grade preparatory school students from Al-Dewanyah General Directorate, who are not part of the main sample, are randomly selected to participate in the pilot administration of the emotive writing test (pre and posttests). The pilot research will begin on October 13, 2025. The pilot administration aims to achieve the following goals:

- 1.Consider the clarity of the emotive writing exam and the scale.
 - 2.Determine how long it will take the participants to complete the composition.
 - 3.Analyze the test to ascertain its level of discrimination power and complexity.
- It turns out that the emotive writing exam has no significant uncertainty. Each student takes 15 to 25 minutes to complete the test, it is found.

Items Analysis of the Instrument

The statistical analysis of a test's components is one of the most crucial aspects of its development; according to Anastasi (1993). using questions whose high psychometric qualities improves the reliability and validity of the test .the matter is important to figure out the statistical analysis of things, that attempts to determine their discriminating powers and reliability coefficient, for the reason that the standard evaluation of items could not properly indicate their reliability and validity. The analysis shows how accurately the items evaluate the things for which they were created (Ebel, 1972).

The Experiment

The experiment began on October 1st, 2025, and ran for twelve weeks throughout the 2025–2026 school year, ending on January 5th, 2026.Throughout the experiment, both groups get the identical daily lessons. In order to make sure the students in the experimental groups are aware with the DEFENDS method, they receive explanations about it. In contrast, the control group is taught using the conventional approach to teaching writing in accordance with the teacher's guidebook for the fifth preparatory class. Cronbach's Alpha was employed to gauge The test's reliability coefficient came out at 0.85, indicating strong internal consistency. Expert validation was carried out and demonstrated in order to guarantee the validity and reliability of the WP test.

Results

The experimental and control groups' mean scores on the writing posttest were 90.031 and 64.125, respectively, with standard deviations (SD) of 30.692 and 22.588, according to statistical analysis. The calculated t-test value is 3.846, which is greater than the critical value of 2.000. According to table (2):

Table (2): t-value of students' scores for both groups in WP posttest

Groups	Num.	Mean	SD	t-value		DF	Results
				Computed	critical		
experimental	31	31.94	5.831	5.929	2.000	60.05	Significant For the Exp.
control	31	39.61	4.240				

							group 0.05
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For this reason, the Cohen formula is utilized to confirm the effect size of the independent variable (DEFENDS strategy). If the effect size falls below 0.41, it is considered weak; if it falls between 0.70 and 0.41, it is considered medium; if it exceeds 0.70, it is considered high. The outcome demonstrates that the independent variable's effect size reaches (0.37), indicating a large effect size . The study's null hypothesis is rejected based on the obtained results.

Discussion

The present study results are consistent with the earlier studies examined earlier. The aforementioned study illustrates the success of DEFENDS strategy in promoting students' writing performance.

Based on this study, the following factors contribute to the advantageous outcomes of the technique under investigations:

1. The experimental group that received the DEFENDS method showed a very noticeable improvement in writing performance, according to the data.
2. In comparison, the control group, which received traditional writing instruction, only shown slight improvement.
3. The DEFENDS approach helps EFL students improve their writing abilities.
4. It ensures that pupils comprehend the requirements for finishing the writing assignment.
5. Students are inspired to practice the exercises in actual situations.
6. Students used the DEFENDS strategy in their practice repetition and feedback.
7. By using the DEFENDS strategy frequently, students become conscious of their grammatical and vocabulary errors.
8. The defense plan creates a genuine, captivating environment.
9. The DEFENDS method creates safe, welcoming, and supportive learning environments. In this way, it is necessary to motivate pupils to take chances and attempt new things.
10. Although the results show that the DEFENDS technique significantly improved writing ability, some challenges were noted.

Conclusions

the following conclusions are pointed out in the light of the study's findings :

1. Teachers can increase their students level of WP through using DEFENDS strategy .
2. Students at experimental group exhibit active engagement through using DEFENDS strategy .
3. The control group that use conventional means proved the ineffectively methods towards developing students' WP.
4. Besides being statistically significant, DEFENDS strategy has a noticeable impact on Iraqi EFL students.

Recommendations

In the light of the above-mentioned findings and conclusion; here are some recommendations :

1. Teachers should make use of DEFENDS strategy to help them achieve their goals perfectly.
2. Students should follow such strategies to make their tasks easier with ample understanding.
3. Writing performance can be developed and reach high level if the curriculum designers include such interesting strategies.

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