

# Most appropriate method of teaching composition writing to school students of Sudan

## Abstract

The study aimed to look at the present situation of teaching composition writing in three states, namely, The Red Sea State, River Nile State, and Khartoum State. The study problem depended on those who faced difficulties in writing a composition which were related to the content, organization and style of composition writing. The research had adopted the descriptive method since it suits the nature and aim of the study. In order to carry out this activity, the investigators used structured interviews of fifteen questions to obtain information from teachers of English at secondary schools in these States. About composition writing observation Checklist was made to observe what actually was done by the teachers of English when they teach their students a composition lesson.

The study revealed very significant results. The most important ones were: students confront many and various difficulties when they attempt to write an English composition. Neither guided nor free composition writing can be achieved which is the main objective of teaching an English composition. Based on the study results, the study recommendations were suggested. The most significant ones were: the influence of psychological factor on composition writing skills of the participants, composition writing should be as realistic as possible as it is a mean of communications and teachers should keep in mind that the two types of composition, guided and free, were different, and that acquiring one did not ensure improving the other since students will acquire what they have practiced.

**Keywords:** psychological influence, composition writing, Sudan

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## Introduction

Communication is a tool to the successful transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver. Whenever communication takes place, of course, there is a sender/encoder and a receiver/decoder. This is the case even when a writer writes a composition from here the writer assumes that there will be a reader one day and that reader will be performing a communicative act when reading the composition.

When students write in a foreign language, the initial care of the writing activity is to avoid grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. Under circumstances, sometimes students write grammar exercises which are disguised as composition writing, which is called guided writing, in which students are given a short text and instructed to change all the masculine pronouns to feminine ones or to change all singular nouns to plural nouns or to change from present tense to past tense. Students do not create the texts themselves, because a more traditional philosophy of teaching language has persuaded teachers that students are not ready to create a piece of writing; they are only ready to manipulate forms. Writing is carefully controlled so that the students see only correct language and practice grammar structures that they have learned. Students learning a foreign language often do not do real writing at all even if they can already write in their first language.

In other, more advanced, classes following the same philosophy, students are assigned composition or other kinds of texts to write. Most often in these classes, the poor teacher takes home many students' exercise books at right and carefully marks all the grammatical and mechanical errors in their writings. When the exercise books are

returned to the students, often the students are asked to take their exercise books home and correct all the errors and may copy the texts onto clean sheets. The focus in these types of composition writing exercises is primarily on language structure. Students get good marks if they write compositions with as few errors as possible. In order to avoid errors, students naturally write very cautiously and conservatively in their foreign language. If what they have to say does not with what they already know how to say, they simply write something easier as a result, student's composition writing becomes crippled, filled with clichés, and very boring both for the student who is writing and for the teacher reading all those exercise books.

## Literature review

Gorman<sup>1</sup> defines composition as "the production and arrangement of written sentences in a manner appropriate to the purposes of the writer and the function of what is written". The investigators deem that composition writing is a complex activity requiring a variety of skills. Hudson<sup>2</sup> states that a composition is any organized, self contained piece of writing intended for special purposes. In the researchers' opinion, the term is frequently used for writing assignments, where it usually means a self-conscious process in which students may make thoughtful decisions concerning what they say, and how to organize and develop their ideas. John Langan<sup>3</sup> argues that in addition to believing that writing composition is a natural gift, many people falsely believe that writing composition should flow in a simple, straight line from the writer's head onto the written page. From the researchers' point of view; composition writing is seldom an easy, one-step journey in which a finished paper comes out in a first draft. Truth

is that, writing a composition is a process of discovery that involves a series of steps, and those steps are very often a zigzag journey. The skills based approach views writing composition as a collection of separate skills, including letter formation, spelling, punctuation, grammar, organization and the like. This approach also purports writing a composition as a product-oriented task. In this respect, Mc Laughlin et al.<sup>4</sup> state that writing a composition, like many other complex tasks, requires learners to organize a set of related sub-tasks and their components. In contrast, many language experts approach writing composition as a meaning-making process, which is governed by purpose and audience rather than by compositional rules. From the viewpoint of such researchers, a thorough definition of composition writing should involve both skills and meaning.

Ross W et al.<sup>5</sup> in their book state that, *Writing and Skills* describe the three stages involved in composition writing process as rewriting which includes all the preliminary things students do to get started writing, the writing stage involves putting their ideas into sentences and then into paragraphs and post writing includes changing or adding to their first draft. It also involves sharing their writing with an audience and having others helps them revise and edit their compositions. Finally, post writing means polishing the final product by proof reading and making corrections in grammar, mechanics and spelling. In the researchers' opinion, Ross W et al.<sup>5</sup> complete definition of composition writing process because their definition includes all the requirements of the activity. Henning's<sup>6</sup> stresses the components of composition writing process are importance of rehearsing ideas before writing by brain storming and categorizing ideas, the malleability of first draft, the steps to take the pleasure of sharing ideas through writing. From the investigators' viewpoint, the whole work- the finished product- must demonstrate a certain degree of taste, originality, creativity, and harmony; it is this degree that indicates the artistic value of a composition. Joseph O'dengo<sup>7</sup> explains the process of writing a composition in a very striking way; he says, "It is the task of writing a composition which forces you to organize your own thinking and develop your own point of view. To the researchers, students expressing themselves, ideas, new information, or whatever, in written form, are really a 'life-skill' which they will need in almost every area of work. Composition writing gives them practice and opportunity to develop the skill to express them.

From the researchers' point of view, the act of writing differs from that of speaking in that it is less spontaneous and more demanding resources which are available for communication are fewer because people cannot - as they do in conversation - interact with the listeners and adapt as they go along. For this reason, the conventions of writing tend to be less flexible than those of speaking, and the language which is used, tends to be standardized. Geoffrey et al.<sup>8</sup> set out the process of writing composition by stating that "when we write, unlike when we talk, we are engaged in an activity which is usually at the same time both private and public". Francaise<sup>9</sup> defines controlled composition as "all the writing your students do for which a great deal of the content and/or form is supplied". Controlled composition writing is opposite to free writing, he adds, in free composition writing, students generate, organize, and express their own ideas in their own sentences. The researchers consider that for any composition writing task, with guided composition too, students should be able to discuss, make notes, share findings and plan strategies together before they begin to write. Karen Greene<sup>10</sup> stresses the definition of parallel composition writing by saying, "parallel composition writing is, in a way, the freest kind of controlled composition writing". In the researchers' view, instead of making change in a given passage or writing according

to an outline or given sentences, students read and study a passage and then write their own on a similar theme, using given passage as a guide for vocabulary, sentence structure, cohesive devices, and organization of the model passage. Arthur Brooks<sup>11</sup> elevates the status of controlled composition by stating that "controlled composition is a useful tool at all levels of composition teaching and not just in the early stages before students have gained enough fluency to handle free composition".

The researchers see that, it is with that word 'enough' that the difficulty arises. How much language acquisition is enough for a student to be able to write few sentences? Teachers let students speak their new language as much as possible, they give them exercises for practice, they encourage them to try to express themselves, and they are delighted if students understand what they say. Teacher's offers help as they go along, correcting grammar, supplying an idiom, suggesting a word. While writing, too, students need the same opportunity to get words down on paper as soon as possible and to try out the written language. Brooks goes on to support his preference to controlled composition and added that "controlled composition gives students focused practice in getting words down on paper and in concentrating on one or two problems at a time". From the researchers' viewpoint, for the teacher, controlled composition is easier to evaluate and less time-consuming, so more number of compositions can be assigned. If the student is steered away from choosing content or what to say about a topic because it is supplied, then both the student and the teacher can devote full attention to mastery of the focal point of the controlled composition, whether that is the use of past tense, plural or the tenses used in indirect speech.

## Rationale

The importance of this study is that it seeks to help resolve the dispute among foreign language Methodists and teachers over the method to be followed in teaching composition. Since neither the free composition nor the guided composition can alone realize the ultimate goal of teaching composition, hence a new method will be recommended. Composition writing provides students with physical evidence of their achievement and this in turn helps them to determine what they know and what they do not know. Additionally composition writing can enhance students' thinking skills. Finally, it can foster students' vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and punctuation use.

In other words, the researchers agree to her description and characterize good writers as people who have a sense of purpose, a sense of audience, and a sense of direction in their writing. Unskilled writers tend to be much more unstructured and much less confident in their approach. Smith F<sup>12</sup> highlights the advantages of free composition as, "it helps students to discover what they can write about given theme. It also obliges students to redraft thereby highlighting the importance of redrafting in the process of composing".

## Objectives

The aim of this study is to find a more effective method of teaching composition writing to EFL students. The method aims at showing students the difference in purpose between teaching composition in a foreign language and in the mother tongue. It also aims at teaching how to develop free, fresh & imaginative writing.

The researchers think that the process of composition writing as Smith puts it consists of three major activities or groups of activities: pre-writing, writing and rewriting, and editing. Hedge<sup>13</sup> defines free composition as "a technique which has the main purpose of generating

ideas". In the researchers' view this technique tries to overcome the problem of writer's 'block'. It has sometimes been called speed writing or quick writing because its main feature is writing as quickly as possible without stopping. It's another main feature, than product of the speed, is that the writer concentrates on content rather than on form. In this way, the primary focus is on getting as many ideas down on paper as possible. At a later stage, quality can take over from quantity in a process of selection and redrafting. Tribble<sup>14</sup> also defines the process of composition writing in a skillful way, he says "it includes all of the preparatory work a writer does before beginning writing, as well as the work that he or she does while writing and during revising and editing". The researchers believe that it is now generally accepted that most writing processes are cyclical and non-linear rather than simple and linear. Learning to write is not just a question of developing a set of mechanical 'orthographic' skills, it also involves learning a new set of cognitive and social skills. Similar view is started by, Kress: "command of writing gives access to certain cognitive, conceptual, social, and political arenas".<sup>15</sup> Commenting on this, the researchers think that, the person who commands both the forms of writing and of speech is therefore constructs in a fundamentally different way from the person who commands the forms of speech alone. Zamel<sup>16</sup> & Raimes<sup>17</sup> shared a description of the process of composition writing as being "recursive and complex". In the researchers' opinion, although there are identifiable stages in a composition, typically writers will revisit some of these stages many times before the composition is complete. On the other hand, Hedge<sup>13</sup> expresses an opinion which is shared by most commentators on the process of composition writing when she says: "good writers tend to concentrate on getting the content right first and leave details like correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar until later". The investigators see that such an approach to preparing for writing reduces the emphasis on the actual composition, stresses rather the importance of good preparation. If writers have a clear sense of direction, based on an explicit understanding of the structure, they are going to write and have done the preparation which they have carried out in the context of this understanding, composition itself can cease to be dependent on invention alone and become much more a process of systematic assembly. Bialy Stock & Ryan<sup>18</sup> state that the process of composition writing "depends on more detailed analyzed knowledge". Brooks,<sup>19</sup> on the other hand, describes the process of composition writing in a very cunning and different way, he says: Writing is highly personal affairs, in which the learner must respect all the mandatory features of the target language code as it appears when written, while at the same time being permitted and encouraged to exploit the volitional and creative aspects of the new language to the extent that his ability and his experience permit. Samonte<sup>20</sup> states that composition process "is the production of a sequence of sentences arranged in a certain order, and linked together in certain ways to form a coherent text". From the researchers' point of view, such an organization of sentences into a coherent text enables the writer to communicate successfully with the reader through the medium of writing.

## Methodology

Descriptive cross sectional study, conducted in secondary schools of Three Sudanese states, Khartoum state, River Nile state and Red sea state. One thousand students and fifty English teachers were selected randomly from secondary schools students in those states.

## Results

The study found that:

1. The most significant aim of teaching composition at the secondary stage was distant communication.
2. Informal English was not a suitable type for written English at secondary level schools.
3. It was preferable to link written work with the main course that was included in the textbooks.
4. To enable skills of composition writing were of paramount significance in writing a composition.
5. The main principle on which composition writing relies was the definite aim of writing.
6. Writing exercises included in the textbook were suitable and sufficient for helping students practice the writing skills they need.
7. There were many difficulties that are faced by Sudanese secondary school students in writing the content of their composition.
8. Most of the teachers of English preferred teaching guided composition to free composition since scoring were an easy task for them and students make fewer mistakes.
9. Teachers' majority state that identifying students' areas of misunderstanding was the foremost advantage of free composition activity.
10. Most of the difficulties encountered by the students in composition were related to psychological factor.

## Conclusion

Guided composition is an effective activity to teach composition writing to school students of Sudan. Further studies should be done involving other Sudanese states.

## Recommendations

1. Teachers and students should bear in mind that composition writing is considered an effective means of communication.
2. Written work should be linked with the main course since it connects the students with what is included in the textbook. The gap between an analysis of writing and actual classroom teaching should be bridged.
3. Teachers should know exactly what a composition writing activity should achieve. The aim should be based on the students' needs and the syllabus.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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