

The Role of Using IELTS Model Essays in Improving Learners' Writing and their Awareness of Writing Features

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the role of using IELTS model essays in improving Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. It further sought to explore these learners' perceptions as of what aspects of their writing they noticed to have improved after being exposed to model essays. In this study, the learners' attention to writing features was classified into four language related episodes (LREs): lexical resources, form, discourse, and relevance. The participants were 65 learners, participating in three groups; group A: intermediate students with no model essay exposure, group B: intermediate students with model essay exposure, and group C: advanced students with model essay exposure. The results of the posttest revealed that using model essays did bear a significant impact on the writing improvement of the learners. Immediately after the posttest, 17 randomly selected participants were asked to think aloud as they were going over their own essays to state in what aspects of writing they had benefited from model essays. The same participants were interviewed to ascertain their general attitude towards using model essays. The findings indicated that there was a significant difference in the frequencies of learners' LREs denoting their differential attention to the writing features and all interviewees expressed their satisfaction with using model essays.

Keywords: language-related episodes (LREs), IELTS model essays, think-aloud protocol, writing ability

Introduction

Over the decades, there has been a growing number of English learners wishing to study at the tertiary level in English speaking countries. As a result, many ESL students are enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses which provide the opportunity to acquire essential skills for their prospective studies in universities where the medium of instruction is English. Besides acquiring academic skills, EAP courses have other aims such as supporting nonnative English speaker students to go through English

language tests like the IELTS, which is widely recognized as a language requirement for entering universities mainly in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. Academic essay-writing is one of the important skills which international students must acquire both for their prospective studies in universities where English is the medium of instruction and for obtaining the required score in the writing section of the IELTS. However, due to the complexities of learning to write well in an L2, there has been vigorous debate on more efficient and effective teaching methods and feedback among many EAP teachers and L2 writing researchers.

Model Essays

A sizeable number of researchers argue that feedback plays an essential role in L2 writing instruction (e.g. Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Hyland, 2003; Leki, 1990; Tickoo, 2001). One type of feedback in L2 writing instruction among others is model essays written by native or native-like proficient writers.

Model essays in general are good examples of writing provided by instructors or by textbooks for students to read and imitate. Charney and Carlson (1995) define a model as a text produced by a specific writer in a given situation, which exemplifies a genre that can be generalized across writers in the same situation.

Model essays are commonly used by L1 writing instructors to enhance students' writing skills. A survey conducted among 70 university composition teachers indicated that about 76% of them used modeling regularly in their writing classes (Stolarek, 1994). Similarly, Watson (1982) indicates that many ESL teachers believe that an effective way to teach writing is to make the students read and imitate models. Wu (2002) also maintains that although using models in writing classrooms is still a controversial issue, it is not uncommon.

Through reading model essays, L2 students can become familiar with a particular genre, namely, description, narration, contrast and comparison, exposition, and argumentation and obtain specific information from specified writing works to be able to take actions within the genre (Miller, 1984). Furthermore, model essays supply students not only with genre-specific examples and input but also topic-specific ones which learners can make use of in their own writings. As Hillocks (1986) states, "In order to write an essay of a given type, the writer must be familiar with examples of the type and

know the parts of the type and their relationships” (p. 154). Model essays thereby focus the attention of the students on the features of texts and are mainly concerned with developing the students’ abilities in producing those features accurately. Hence, it might be claimed that using model essays features a product approach towards writing and “has its origin in the traditions of rhetorics” (Hedge, 2000, p. 319).

However, it seems that there is more to model essays than a controlled focus on formal features of the model. Swales (1990) and Raimes (1991, 1998) indicated that through exposure to models of standard paragraphs and essays as well as genres of writing, including flyers, magazine articles, letters, and so forth, learners may be able to communicate more effectively with their audience. Text analysis is another application of model essays. By means of analyzing the text of model essays, L2 writers become aware of how particular grammatical features are used in authentic discourse contexts. This might depend very much on the proficiency level of the learners; however, what is of paramount importance as Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) maintain is that as students progress, they need to become aware of a variety of forms that “serve the writer’s purpose instead of the other way around” (p. 548). This is in line with the genre analysis approach within text analysis (Hedge, 2000) in which writing is viewed as “being linked to the values and expectations of a particular discourse community” (p. 320). This entails writing which is effectively organized if we interpret serving the writer’s purpose quoted above as demonstrating the writer’s voice in addressing the audience in the intended discourse community. Then one comes to the conclusion that both teachers and learners need “criteria for effectiveness” (Hedge, 2000, p. 321) and essay models can provide such criteria for teachers and learners.

Think-Aloud

Approaches to study learners’ thought processes are of interest in SLA research due to the fact that they provide insight about how successful and unsuccessful learners process a second language. A think-aloud protocol is a method in which the participants “verbalize their thought processes while they are involved in processing language, typically reading a text or writing an essay” (McKay, 2006, p. 60). Another way of exploring the mental processes for the learners is a retrospective report in which such verbalization takes place immediately after processing the language. Think-aloud protocols are of particular value because they focus on the problems learners have.

Although Ericsson and Simon (1993) have shown that gathering think-aloud data in real-time can be problematic because think-aloud utterances are often incoherent, most studies which implemented think-aloud protocols (e.g. Branch, 2000; Fonteyn, Kuipers, & Grobe, 1993) found that asking post-process questions from learners provided valuable information and after all “this method is one of the few available means for finding out more about the thought processes of second language learners” (MacKay, 2006, p. 60).

Language-Related Episodes (LREs)

Language Related Episodes (LREs) are verbalized language units (episodes) produced during think-aloud procedures. Swain and Lapkin (1998, cited in Jackson, 2001) define LREs as a dialogue or a part of a dialogue in which the language learners “talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (p. 298). In other words, they are verbalized utterances thought aloud through a single performance evaluation. According to Jackson (2001), “LREs were initially units of analysis to examine the goal-appropriateness of discourse used in completion of classroom tasks” (p. 298). Therefore, he further considers LREs to be a description construct which is created by the learners in the process of language use and is used in “classroom research to identify the degree to which language learners address recently learned or problematic features of the target language, allowing for the systematic categorization of these episodes by the researchers” (p. 298). Such a categorization was carried out on the writings of L2 learners by researchers such as Swain and Lapkin (1995) and Qi and Lapkin (2001), and the learners’ LREs were classified into four broad categories: lexical resources (selecting words, phrases, and expressions), form (articles, agreement, sentence structure, verb form, tense, prepositions, comparative and superlative, punctuation, and spelling), discourse (logical sequencing, cohesion and coherence, and organization of paragraphs), and relevance (domain words, relevant supporting ideas, and students’ topic related opinions and background knowledge).

Having adopted an interest in model essays and also due to their experience in teaching IELTS courses, the researchers attempted to investigate the role of using model essays as a pedagogical tool in L2 writing instruction. Moreover, the study aimed at revealing how Iranian EFL learners noticed their writing problems through exposure to model essays in the context of preparation for the IELTS writing test. To this end, the following research questions were raised:

1. Does IELTS model essay exposure have a significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' writing?
2. Is there a significant difference in the rate of writing improvement between intermediate and advanced learners exposed to IELTS model essays?

Also, this study tried to investigate the following corollary research questions:

3. In what aspects of writing do EFL learners preparing to sit for the IELTS have problems?
4. What aspects of their writing do EFL learners believe to have improved as a result of exposure to IELTS model essays?
5. How do learners evaluate the use of model essays for improving learners' writing?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 65 Iranian EFL learners studying to prepare themselves for the IELTS. These 65 were selected from among 115 participants based on the scores they gained for the essays they wrote on a sample IELTS Writing Task 2. The subjects were divided into three groups for the treatment that followed; group A: intermediate students with no model essay exposure (22 students), group B: intermediate students with model essay exposure (20 participants), and group C: advanced IELTS students with model essay exposure (23 learners). All participants were studying in a language school in Shiraz. The scores of the first two groups ranged from 4-5 (this is in accordance to the definition of "intermediate" in the IELTS writing module) while the third group had gained a score of six and above ("advanced" as per the same definition). Two experienced IELTS writing teachers rated the papers once inter-rater reliability between the two had been established.

Instrumentation

The writing task given to each participant was randomly selected from among Task 2 (argumentative essay) topics of Cambridge's past administered IELTS

writing tests. There was a minimum requirement for word length (at least 250 words). Two argumentative essay topics of “Give your own opinions about either growing children in strict discipline or leaving them free to learn lessons of lives on their own” for the pretest and “Discuss whether you agree or disagree with spending much more money and time on appearance” for the posttest were used. The standard IELTS global codification system on a scale of 1-9 was employed for rating the participants’ performances on both tests.

In addition to the frequency analysis of the LREs which appear in full in later sections, two interview questions were used for the think-aloud protocol following the posttest. The questions were: “Do you think that using model essays was helpful to improve your writing? Why?” and “Besides model essays, what do you need in order to obtain more beneficial feedback? Please describe what this model essay approach lacks”.

Procedure

Following the selection procedure of the 65 participants based on the writing pretest described above, the treatment for the three groups commenced. While the intermediate learners in group A received the routine writing instruction of the IELTS program during the term (40 hours), those in groups B and C were given approximately 60 model essays written by native or native-like writers apart from the routine writing training of group A. These model essays were taken from a book called *Crack IELTS in a Flash*. Throughout the term, at least three model essays were presented every session to groups B and C. As the teachers were working on model essays, they would explain different academic writing points such as organization of paragraphs, cohesive devices, domain words, relevant supporting ideas, topic related opinions, structural points, etc. provided by the writers in the essays.

At the end of the term, the writing posttest was conducted among all 65 learners alongside the think-aloud protocol for a randomly selected number of 17 participants in groups B and C, and an interview in the following three stages:

Stage 1: Writing posttest (in English: 40 minutes). Each of the 65 participants was asked to write one essay of at least 250 words on the topic described above within approximately 40 minutes with no collaboration with other students just as s/he would do so in a real-life IELTS exam setting. The data

obtained from posttest of group A and B were used to answer the first question which intended to compare the intermediate participants in control and experimental groups. The data obtained from the pretest and posttest of group B and C were used to answer the second question which intended to compare the intermediate and advanced participants in experimental groups. Moreover, the frequency count of different types of errors in the pretest and posttest of 20 randomly-selected subjects from each group was used to answer the third question.

Stage 2: Think-aloud (in Farsi: 10 minutes). This stage was conducted immediately after the posttest. First, 17 participants randomly selected from groups B and C – i.e. those who underwent model essay exposure at intermediate and advanced levels – were trained to produce think-aloud protocols for a few minutes so that they would get accustomed to it and be free from anxiety. Next, the sheets containing these 17 students' essays were given to them and each participant was asked to go over his/her essay and think aloud whatever features they had paid attention to and learned from the model essays. The verbal instruction which each participant received was the following:

You received many model essays during the term and now you wrote your own final essay. Please go over it and tell me whether using model essays has affected your writing skill. If yes, what aspects? Any general or specific matters are okay.

The participants' think-aloud protocols (in Farsi) took 5-10 minutes for each participant and were recorded.

Stage 3: Interviews (in Farsi: five minutes). After the think-aloud session, the researchers interviewed each of the participants who had already undergone the above procedure to gain further insight about their attitude towards using model essays in improving their writing skills. Moreover, the two teachers (teaching the three groups) were also interviewed about the effect of model essays. The questions asked whether the candidates believed that model essays were helpful in improving their writing or not, and about what suggestions they had for adding to the model essay approach.

Results

In order to respond to the research questions raised in this study, a series of statistical analyses were conducted which are described below.

Selecting the Participants

As described earlier, the 65 participants in this study were assigned to the three groups based on their scores on the writing pretest (4-5 for the intermediate and 6 and above for the advanced group). Since two raters scored these tests, an inter-rater reliability was run to make sure that the two raters were consistent in their scoring. The correlation coefficient was 0.89.

Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to investigate whether model essay exposure bore a significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' writing or not. To answer this question, the scores that the students of groups A and B gained on the posttest essays following the treatment were used for the analysis. However, in order to run an independent sample *t*-test, homogeneity of variance was checked by running Levene's test. The results demonstrated equality of variance ($F = 0.618, p = 0.437 > 0.05$). Moreover, to legitimize running a *t*-test, the normality of the distributions of the scores for group A and B were checked (Table 1).

Table 1 – The results of the normality check (Groups A and B)

Group	Skewness	Standard error of skewness	The sig. value
Control Group	- 0.129	0.491	- 0.26
Experimental Group	- 0.109	0.374	- 0.29

As demonstrated in Table 1, the values for both groups fell within the range of -1.96 and +1.96; therefore, it was concluded that both distributions were normal and running the independent *t*-test was legitimized (Table 2).

Table 2 – Independent samples *t*-test results on the posttest (Groups A and B)

	Groups	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post test	with model essay exposure	20	5.350	.67	2.994	40	.005
	without model essay exposure	22	4.795	.52			

As is shown in Table 2, the means of the two sets of scores for the intermediate participants in the control and experimental groups were 4.795 and 5.350, respectively. Based on the result of the *t*-test ($t = 2.994$, $df = 40$, $\rho = 0.005 < 0.05$), it can be concluded that the difference between the mean scores of the two groups was statistically significant and that using model essays did bring about significantly positive effects on intermediate participants' writing.

Research Question 2

The second research question focused on whether there was significant difference in the rate of the writing improvement between intermediate and advanced learners exposed to model essays, i.e. groups B and C, respectively. To do this, the gain scores for each group (between the pretest and posttest) were computed and then an independent *t*-test was run between the mean gain scores of the two groups to see whether exposure to model essays resulted in more improvement in the writing of intermediate level or in that of the advanced level. However, this was done after obtaining the results of Levene's test of equality of variance ($F = 1.162$, $\rho = 0.278 > 0.05$), and checking the normality of the two distributions of scores which are reported in Table 3 below:

**Table 3 – The results of the normality check
(Groups B and C)**

Group	Skewness	Standard error of skewness	The sig value
Experimental Intermediate	- 0.109	0.374	- 0.29
Experimental Advanced	- 0.161	0.481	- 0.33

As demonstrated in Table 3, the values for both groups fell within the range of -1.96 and +1.96; therefore, it was concluded that both distributions were normal and running the independent *t*-test was legitimized (Table 4).

Table 4 – Independent samples *t*-test results on the gain scores (Groups B and C)

Groups	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Intermediate with model essays exposure	20	.4250	.4064	-2.90	41	.006
Advanced with model essays exposure	23	.8043	.4457			

As demonstrated in Table 4, the difference between the gain scores of the two groups was significant ($t = 2.9$, $df = 41$, $p = 0.006 < 0.05$), indicating that using model essays was more advantageous for advanced learners.

Research Question 3

The third research question intended to investigate what aspects of writing were difficult or problematic for the participants of the study who were going to take the IELTS. To this end, 20 participants from all three groups were randomly chosen and the errors they made in both essays (pre- and posttest) were separately identified and critically analyzed. Then, the frequencies of the four major categories (lexical resources, form, discourse, and relevance) were counted. The descriptive statistics for the pretest and posttest errors falling in the above four major categories are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 – The frequency and percentage of errors in all three groups' pre- and posttests (20 participants)

Categories	Pretest		Posttest	
	F	%	F	%
Lexical resources	119	17	67	15
Form	452	65	324	71
Discourse	89	13	48	11
Relevance	40	5	16	3
Total	700	100	455	100

According to Table 5, the most frequent errors in both the pre- and posttest were related to form, lexical resources, discourse, and relevance, respectively. As can be seen in the table, the total frequency of errors dropped from 700 in the pretest to 455 in the posttest. There were noteworthy drops in the frequency of errors in all four categories from the pretest to posttest. The one case which needs further elaboration is errors of form: 452 errors of form occurred before model essay exposure while there were only 324 of such errors after the treatment. Interestingly, despite the decrease in the absolute value of such errors through the treatment, the overall percentage had increased due to a huge drop in the other three areas, thus leaving errors of form as the most common in the posttest. Thus, form is the first area where IELTS candidates who underwent this study had problems.

Based on the results displayed in Figures 1 and 2, the advanced group had higher frequencies of errors on form and lexical resources compared to intermediate on the pretest but in the posttest, the situation changed and their errors became less than those of the intermediate group. On the other hand, advanced students had fewer problems than intermediate students on the discourse and relevance both in the pretest and the posttest. Generally, students with higher L2 proficiency had fewer mistakes than intermediate learners after exposure to the essays. This was in line with the *t*-test results.

Figure 1 – The frequency of the four error types in the pretest

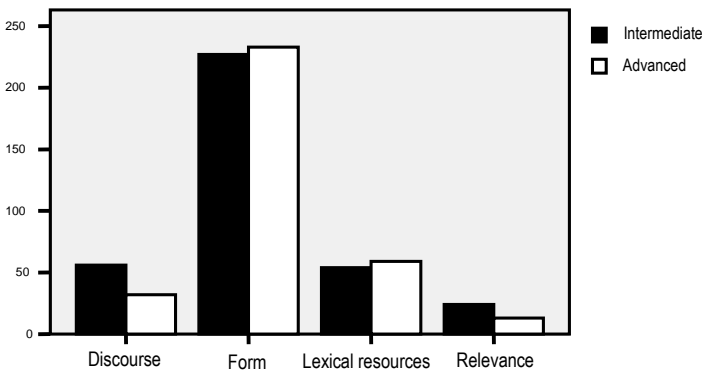
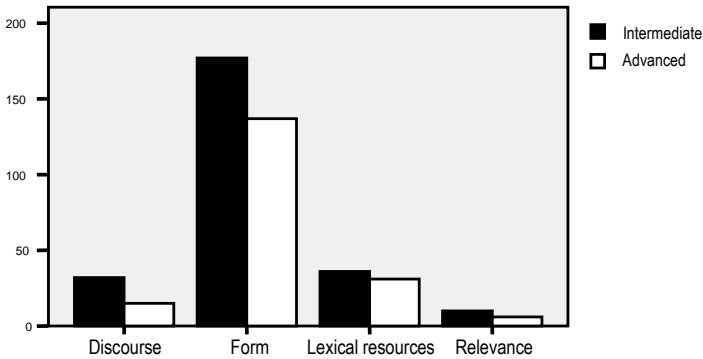


Figure 2 – The frequency of the four error types in the posttest



Research Question 4

The fourth research question aimed at investigating which aspects of their writing the participants believed had improved due to exposure to model essays. Accordingly, the randomly selected participants' think-aloud protocols were transcribed and the frequencies of four broad categories were identified. To recapitulate, these LREs were collected during the think-aloud procedure from 17 randomly selected participants from groups B and C. The frequencies and percentages of the LREs are reported in Table 6.

Table 6 – The frequencies and percentages of the verbalized LREs in the four main categories

Categories	F	%
Lexical resources	109	39
Form	75	27
Discourse	31	11
Relevance	62	23
Total	277	100

As presented in Table 6, the largest proportion and frequency of the subjects' awareness of LREs was lexical resources (39%) followed by form, relevance,

and discourse. The findings revealed that the lexical resources were the most frequent LREs thought aloud by the participants.

Research Question 5

The fifth research question attempted to seek the students' opinions about the use of model essays in order to improve the students' writing skills. The two teachers of the three groups who were experienced IELTS teachers and the students interviewed agreed that model essays played a positive role in improving the students' writing proficiency. Their reasons in order of importance were reported to be as follows:

1. Model essays gave us new ideas to develop and support our opinions related to the topics. Model essays bring a different scope to writing.
2. They present new sophisticated phrases, expressions, and domain words to learn.
3. Through model essays, we learned how to organize our essays.
4. Model essays aided in establishing relationships between and within our sentences and in supporting our topic sentences through examples, reasons, and also our own experiences.
5. With the help of model essays, we were able to pay more attention to sentence structures, words usage, and precise use of prepositions. Sometimes, we were even able to solve our grammatical errors.

The only concern that most interviewees raised was that they thought they should have been tested more often during the term since they believed that more frequent testing would have enabled them to be even more proficient in writing.

Conclusion

The present study explored the role of using IELTS model essays in improving intermediate and advanced learners' writing showing that these models bore a significant impact on improving the learners' writing. The findings also showed that the model essays were more effective on the writing of students with higher L2 proficiency (advanced group). That is to

say, the exposure to model essays led advanced students to improve their writing skills better.

Furthermore, the four major LREs (lexical resources, form, discourse, and relevance) of L2 writing were investigated. The results portrayed that among these LREs, the participants in this study paid less attention to the discourse aspects of the writing. That is to say that the level of learners' awareness of this category was lower than that of the other three categories. Relevance and form received almost similar attention by the learners (23% and 27%, respectively). However, lexical resources received the highest degree of attention by the learners (39%). These indicate that learners believed that model essays improved their lexical resources most, then their problems with forms and relevance. The learners' LREs revealed that they believed model essays improved their problems of discourse to a lesser extent. Interestingly the students' error frequencies also indicated that lexical resources and form were the most problematic areas for the learners of both intermediate and advanced group.

Hence, it can be concluded that model essays written by native or native-like proficient writers can draw students' attention to various aspects of the English language writing differently. Moreover, these models draw the learners' attentions to the features of writing in which they have the most problems. Ultimately, it can be said that through model essay exposure, the participants not only noticed their English writing problems but that that such noticing prompted them to modify their output. Thus, the model essays written by native or native-like proficient writers could serve as a useful resource to encourage L2 writers to pay more attention to the various aspects of their writing skills and hence, improve their writing.

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