

To What Extent Culture Awareness is Important in Improving the Writing Composition at English Department Students in College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University?

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Abstract

This study sought to explore extent to which culture awareness is important in improving the writing composition at English department in College of Science and humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University. The sample was drawn from 2 different groups taking containing 15 students. The study reveals that a culture of reading is very important for effective composition writing as posttest data indicated improvement in performance as compared to the pretest data. Against the backdrop of these findings, the researcher recommends that curriculum developers and implementers should lay more emphasis on reading culture. The study was however comprised of limited sample drawn of English departments in College, thus may not be representative of student's experiences across the universities.

Key Words: culture awareness, culturally responsive teaching, English composition writing

1. Introduction

Writing is complex and involves more than grammar therefore it is important in the learning processes (Elbow, 2002). Its importance is derived from the fact that writing reinforces grammatical structures, vocabulary, idioms, rhetorical organizations and appropriate language use or lexical arrangements (Fang, 2001). Therefore writing should be given more attention in English lesson classes in to prepare learners to cope with the communicative demands of English language (Liu, 2000). The main purpose of teaching writing skills is to prepare English learners to become better writers (Knutson, 2006). These goals can only be achieved through exposing the learners to the writing processes (Downs, & Wardle 2007).

Learning writing skills can be developed when the learner's interests are considered and exposed to the writing of composition therefore writing should be seen as the process of discovery as writers strive to think, compose the idea and put the ideas together in writing (Liu, 2000). Therefore writing should be looked at as cognitive, social and dynamic perspectives. Writing skills as opposed to writing listening, speaking and reading, writing is considered as the most difficult skill because it requires the writer to have lexical and syntactic skills as well as the rhetorical organization (Liu, 2000; Myles, 2002).

Writing generally, involves familiarity with the writing conventions of university culture and disciplinary subcultures in which the foreign language learner participates (Liu, 2000). The past literatures show that when a student is being inducted into a particular or new discipline through lectures and discussions, it is through the written assignments that their success in learning the new language is commonly judged (Johns, 2008). However, the foreign language proficiency is only learnt through writing (Knutson, 2006; Johns, 2008).

The studies have revealed that the problem for foreign students is not language-related problems, due to the fact that a number of students have not met the expectations of the academic readers of the target language (Atkinson, 2003; Ferris et al., 2004). It has also been established that learners who come from communities that practice other forms of discourse whereby literate discourse serves as no function or purpose (Johns, 2008). In addition some foreign student's essays are to be written in the unfamiliar rhetorical styles of the target culture. This study will attempt to explore the extent to which cultural awareness is important in writing composition at English departments students in College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Culture

Culture has been accorded different meanings by different scholars. According to Ismail (2006) culture in the anthropological sense is described as the lifestyle of people within a region. However Menjivar (2006) gives a more detailed meaning to it by stating that culture is an inclusive system that involves the behavior of people within a region taking into consideration their verbal and non-verbal expression of the behavior. In the view of Tang (2006) culture is deeply embedded within each and every individual. He then proceeds to state that language is the most suitable means in which this culture is communicated among individuals confined in a region (Tang, 2006). Ismail (2006) propound the view that culture is communicated through languages. He says

that the belief of an individual, views, feelings, acting and communication are influenced by the culture change from one region to another. To him culture and language are synonyms and an individual is expected to accept the culture of the language prior to proficiently acquire the writing and speaking skills of the language. According to Purnell & Paulanka (2003) culture and language are interconnected hence must be included in the curriculum of any language to be taught in any of the institutions. Culture therefore defines the behavior of individuals and is expressed through communication, as such should be included in the learning process of languages that are considered as means of communication.

2.2 Culturally Responsive Learning

Scholars have posited that culture is central to learning, and effective teaching ought to integrate learner's culture and cultural values or references in the curriculum (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This observation study is encapsulated in the concept of culturally responsive teaching, that the extent to which teachers promote cultural awareness to a large extent impacts on overall students' performance (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). English composition writing, being part of learning, would be subject to this concept. Proponents of culturally responsive learning have given various reasons to account for the anecdotal belief that cultural consciousness and responsiveness would promote students' performance. According to Trent et al. (2008), culturally responsive learning motivates the learner as it makes learning to be more student-centered. Owing to probably cultural interest that learners are likely to have in their culture, learning is likely to turn out to be more interesting than would otherwise be. Consequently, culturally responsive teaching renders the learning process more enjoyable and learner friendly, as the learner easily identified with the facts, values and cultural dimensions that are subject of the curriculum.

That far reaching influence of culture in the specific context of language teaching has equally been noted in various studies. According to Korkmaz (2009), failure to take into account cultural concepts would be damaging to language teaching for reasons that such omission limits intercultural communication and interrelations amongst students of diverse cultural background (namely foreign culture, target culture and home culture). Several studies have also indicated that students show interests in learning diverse culture, making cultural consciousness be a key factor in student motivation (Byram, 2003). Similarly, there are wide range of studies indicating that taking into account cultural issues in language teaching not only foster attentiveness among student, but also reinforce language competency in addition to building language abilities (Sowden, 2007). Regrettably, teachers of languages tend to lay more emphasis on grammar rather than cultural dimensions of words and sentences (Sercu, 2006). This isolated learning of language jeopardizes internalization of language and appreciation of meanings and values of various words (Byram, 2003).

2.3 Influences of Culture on English Writing

Communication and culture of an individual are interlinked hence various aspects of culture have influence on the language adopted as a means of communication. According to Brown (1994) the application of grammatical rules in written language requires an addition of the understanding of the culture of the native language users. He further says that the adoption of a foreign language by a nation requires the application of the culture of ancient founders of the language in order to get the grammatical rules right. Culture is described by Griswold, Zayas, Kernan & Wagner (2007) to influence the writing of a language by an individual. It is observed that the written materials done by a student are evaluated on the basis of the marker. In some case this evaluation is based on the ability of the individual to consider the culture in the context of presentation of the written material for it to be examined as quality. Lazear (1999) also made a comparable observation culture influences the understanding of a language as well as the linguistics requirement in the writing and presentation of the written document. Various researchers have recognized the importance of culture learning amongst foreigners in various countries (Griswold et al., 2007). They observed that the need of the students to carry out effective communication, interpretation, comprehension and production of written texts in the foreign language, required the learning of the culture in addition to the language (Griswold et al., 2007). The culture learnt improved their memories on the syllables as well as the composition of words to obtain a comprehensive and meaningful text in the language.

In addition, Wang (2007) examined the concept of globalization which allows for the interaction of different cultures. For instance, over the last years, China has not only interacted with the outside world economically, but has also interacted in several ways of communication; as an example, different joint-venture companies in China have been forced to teach their workers on how to successfully communicate with their fellow worker as well as clients from Western culture in written forms (Wu, 2001; Shi, 2009). Therefore, it is important for the learners to perfect the art of communication so as to minimize any future communication barriers.

2.4 English Learning and Teaching in Saudi Arabia

In the attempt to improve and maintain an international dialog, Saudi Arabia government adopted English language as the major means of communication within the country. Focusing on the improvement of the proficiency of these foreign languages required the corporation of higher institutions within the region (Menjívar, 2006). It was obtained that teaching in addition to teaching competencies and students' level of understanding,

culture too had a hand to play in improvement of English writing within the region.

2.5 Impacts of Culture adoption on English Writing

English is a foreign language in Saudi Arabia as such requires the study of the culture of the native speakers for its improvement within this department. According to Menjivar (2006) learning and improving the writing skills of a foreign language requires an individual to incorporate the culture of the native speakers. He says that the fact that the language is new to the adopters require an understanding of the linguistic prowess of the language for quality expression in the relevant words (Menjivar, 2006). Adoption of culture in writing of English improves the codification and assimilation of the words to provide relevant meaning as was required by the developers. In addition Purnell and Paulanka (2003) observed that the incorporation of native speakers of English culture in the writing process ensures that the fluency when reading the text as well as the proficiency of the writer is achieved. This incorporation ensures that the meaning of the text is in line with what kind of communication was required by the writer (Ismail, 2006). Griswold et al., (2007) also discovered that the injection of a new form of behavior into an individual through the adoption of a new culture changes the linguistic expression of the individual to that of the adopted culture. As such the adoption of culture in the study of English language greatly improves the writing skills of the adopters.

The literatures reviewed above have generally indicated that cultural awareness, cultural appreciation and cultural integration generally contribute to effective learning, generally and in the specific context of languages. Many of these studies have focused on learning of Languages generally, and the ones that have specifically focused on English as a language have dealt with English language in general. Studies specific to impact of culture on English composition writing have hardly been conducted, thereby leaving a research gap that call for further research. It has also been noted with concern that teachers of language generally lay limited focus on cultural integration. The foregoing discussions raises a vital academic gap (limited studies linking culture and English composition writing), a gap that the proposed study seeks to fill. For a country like Saudi Arabia where the government policies favor learning of English and where English is used as a second language, the need to assess relevance of cultural responsiveness is even more heightened. Saudi Arabia therefore form a vital setting for a study exploring influence of culture on any aspect of English, as such a study would be of direct relevance to Saudi Arabian curriculum policy.

3. Justification for the study

This study is relevant as provides knowledge on cultural aspects in composition writing, a knowledge that can be harnessed to enable the students to become better composition writers. The relationship between culture and composition writing would be used by teacher to teach the students on how to better their composition writing. The study will generally show the connection between the culture and composition writing, an area that has been of limited scholarly attention. It will therefore add to the currently scanty body of knowledge on the concept of culture and English composition teaching.

4. Problem Statement

Cultural awareness is regarded as important in improving the writing composition. Researchers have shown that many students were found to fail to meet standard requirements in writing composition (Johns,2008). The students are expected to produce an appropriate piece of writing which is both linguistically and communicatively valued by composition of English department's students in various universities including College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University (Johns, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand what the students should bring with them to the program in order to be able to respond appropriately to such demands or the requirement of composition of writing when structuring and executing the program(Johns, 2008). This stud seeks to address this gap by investigating the extent in which culture impacts to students' perceptions of writing, learning styles, writing ability.

5. Research Question

The primary research question to be addressed by the study is:

To what extent is culture awareness important in improving the writing composition at English department students in College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University?

6. Limitation of the Study

The present study is limited to participants undertaking a similar course and as such it lacks diversity as students from other courses may pose varied results in relation to composition writing. Moreover, the study does not capture the expressions of the participants from diverse culture as it was done exclusively from students with similar cultural background. Lastly, there could have been other factors responsible for difference in performance among the sampled subjects which may be inconsistent with key assumption of this study that difference in

performance would only be attributable to exposure to cultural awareness program.

7. Methodology

To explore the research question, a case study of English Department Students in College of Sciences and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University was used, with participants being drawn from one course. A pre-test and post-test approach was used, whereby writing skills were tested before and after subjecting the learners to readings on cultural awareness. The specific details on the study subjects, research design, sample and sample size, data collection methods and data analysis strategies have been explained below.

7.1 Subjects

The participants engaged in this study were control and experimental groups, each comprising of 15 students enrolled for English as a major in English department of College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University. The first group had been taught in the first semester of the academic year 2012-2013 according to the program prescribed for teaching the writing composition in general. The second group had been taught in the second semester of the academic year 2012-2013 after introduction of the program of culture awareness. All the participants were enrolled for a similar course involving composition writing, and their level could be classified as intermediate as they were all in their second year of the study.

7.2 Design

The study predominantly employed quantitative experimental research design. The first group served as control group, as they were tested before and after incorporating culture awareness program, and therefore their scores would indicate normal scores without the program. The second group were the experimental group, as they were taken their exams before and after being subjected to cultural awareness program. The study then examined the pre-test and post-test variation in examination results so as to assess whether or not the culture awareness program had an effect on student's scores. Contextualize the study; a case study of a class in College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University was employed.

7.3 Sample

In both pre-test and post-test, sample of 30 students were purposefully selected. The students in both groups were engaged in the pre-test and post-test. The main inclusion criteria are that the students taking part had to be taking English as a course, and should have been attending English composition classes.

7.4 Data Collection

The pre-test data was collected for both groups. The time gap between pretest and posttest was necessary to match the University academic calendars. The pretest and post test data collection periods were first and second semesters respectively.

7.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were applied to the data collected. By the help of SPSS software, relevant descriptive statistics were generated from the data gathered via pretest and posttest English composition scores. The past relevant studies were used to provide further insights and to provide accounts to the findings.

7.6 Ethical Consideration

To ensure acceptability and legitimacy of the study, the researcher observed pertinent ethical issues, including permissions, informed consent and confidentiality. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher secured permission from relevant authorities at English department in College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University (Padgett, 2008; Smith, 2007). The researcher also strictly honoured the undertaking not to use the study for any ulterior purpose in addition to keeping safe and confidential the completed questionnaires and the individual questionnaire outcome. The researcher also withheld the identity of the students sampled for the study while reporting the study, to promote students' anonymity and possible exposure of their examination results. Such anonymity was essential as examination results are extremely regarded as confidential by both the students and the University.

8. Results, Analysis

In the context of a group such as a class of 15 students, the main performance indicator is the group mean, which is an equivalent of the group score. A comparison of both pre-test and post-test mean scores would therefore be the major indicator of each group's performance, and by extension possible impact of the program. The mean only points towards the central tendency, which may not be conclusive indicator of how well the students in both groups performed. Therefore in the interest of enhancing data validity and rigor in the study, the researcher explored other statistical performance indicators, including the standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores, range, skewness and kurtosis. The scores of each statistical performance indicator is illustrated in Table 1, 2 and 3 below. The significance of each statistical indicator is also discussed.

8.1 Pretest Scores

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the pretest scores for both groups.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Pretest Score for group 1	15	57.00	30.00	87.00	59.8000	4.20000	16.26653	264.600	-.209	.580	-.777	1.121
Pretest scores for group 2	15	47.00	37.00	84.00	60.6000	3.94341	15.27276	233.257	-.022	.580	-.991	1.121

Generally, it is notable that there was no substantial difference in the key performance indicators for both groups. For instance, the pretest mean for Group 1 was 59.8% compared to 60.6% for Group 2. The fact that both groups had a mean above the 50% mark indicate that these students were generally bright students. Between the groups however was a negligible range of 0.8. The standard deviation for both groups was equally close with a difference of 0.99377. Similarly, both groups registered a negative skewness (-.209 for group 1) and (-.022), suggesting that the scores were skewed to the left. In both cases, the score distribution was normal, as the skewness value were very close to zero. Minimal differences between the groups in the pretests make it difficult to conclusively infer that either group was academically stronger than the other.

8.2 Posttest Scores

Unlike the pretest scores, the posttest scores showed marked differences in performance between the control and experimental groups. As shown in table 2, the posttest mean score for the second (experimental) group was slightly higher at 65.4667, compared to the first (control) group's mean score of 60.1333. What this mean is that on average the second group performed better than their first counterparts who were not subjected to the cultural awareness program.

Table 1. Result on writing competency before and after taking cultural awareness course

	N	Range	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Pre-test scores (%)	15	60.00	60.1333	4.76582	18.45793	340.695	-.064	.580	-.907	1.121
Post-test scores (%)	15	53.00	65.4667	4.39249	17.01204	289.410	.202	.580	-.873	1.121

Notably, even the posttest performance margin between the groups shot much higher to 5.3334 compared to the 0.8 which was registered in the pretest. Thus, the experimental group not only performed relatively better but also widened the range they had given to their control group counterparts. Much higher mean range in favor of group 2 is a key indicator of a possible beneficial effect of cultural awareness in enhancing the learner's English composition writing skills.

As shown in table 2, the standard deviation for group 1 was slightly higher (18.45793) than group 2 (17.01204). That means that generally, group 1 exhibited greater variability in their performance as compared to the second group. Less variability reflected in lower standard deviation of the second group would be an indication that the cultural awareness program had some effect in minimizing the average scores by which students scored from the central tendency. The variability is an indication of performance gap among students. Thus when read together with the mean, the results suggest that the second group not only performed better than that the first group (as indicated by group 2's higher posttest mean), but also that the scores were closer to one another as compared with the first group (indicated by lower posttest standard deviation for group 2). A possible interpretation here is that apart from enhancing learning skills, the results suggest that cultural awareness has some effect, though limited, of reducing the performance gap among students.

The data for performance range as well as those of minimum and maximum scores too (indicated in table 3) corroborated the results indicated by the mean and standard deviation.

Table 2. Range, maximum and minimum posttest scores for group 1 and 2

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Pretest Score for group 1	15	57.00	30.00	87.00
Pretest scores for group 2	15	47.00	37.00	84.00
Posttest scores for group 1	15	60.00	29.00	89.00
Posttest scores for group 2	15	53.00	42.00	95.00
Valid N (leastwise)	15			

Group 2's best posttest score was higher at 95% as compared to the best group 1's posttest score which was 89%. Thus, the second group had the leading student exceeding the score that scored by the best student in the group 1. Again, this is an indicator of improvement on the second group, especially in view that in the pretests the maximum score for group 2 had been lower (84%) that the group 1's (87%). Similarly, the minimum score for group 2 in the posttest result was 42, which is way above the group 1's posttest minimum score of 29. This is an indication of major improvement for group 2 considering that their lowest score was had not only improved but was also closer to the pass mark of 50%. Despite group 2 registering much higher maximum score in the posttest results, the range (between maximum and minimum scores) was still lower than their group 1 counterparts in the post test results. Lower post test range for group 2, read together with lower posttest standard deviation confirms significant improvement after taking cultural awareness program.

From table 1, the skewness and Kurtosis for both tests suggested normal distribution of the students scores for both groups. However, the group 1 score skewness was more to the left, as reflected in the negative skewness value (-.064). The skewness for the group 2 post test data was more to the right as reflected in the positive skewness value (.202). While the values indicate both right and left skewness, the values for both groups is closer to zero which is skewness for a normal distribution. These skewness values and the distribution suggested by the data are better illustrated in the histograms in figure 1 and 2.

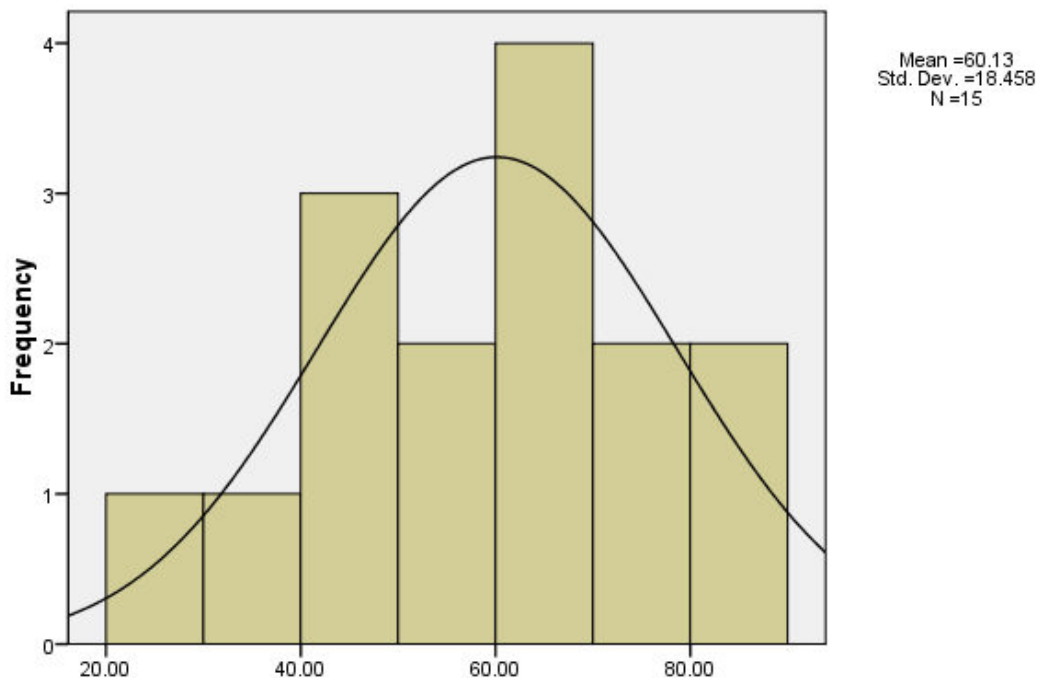


Figure 1: Histogram for pretest scores

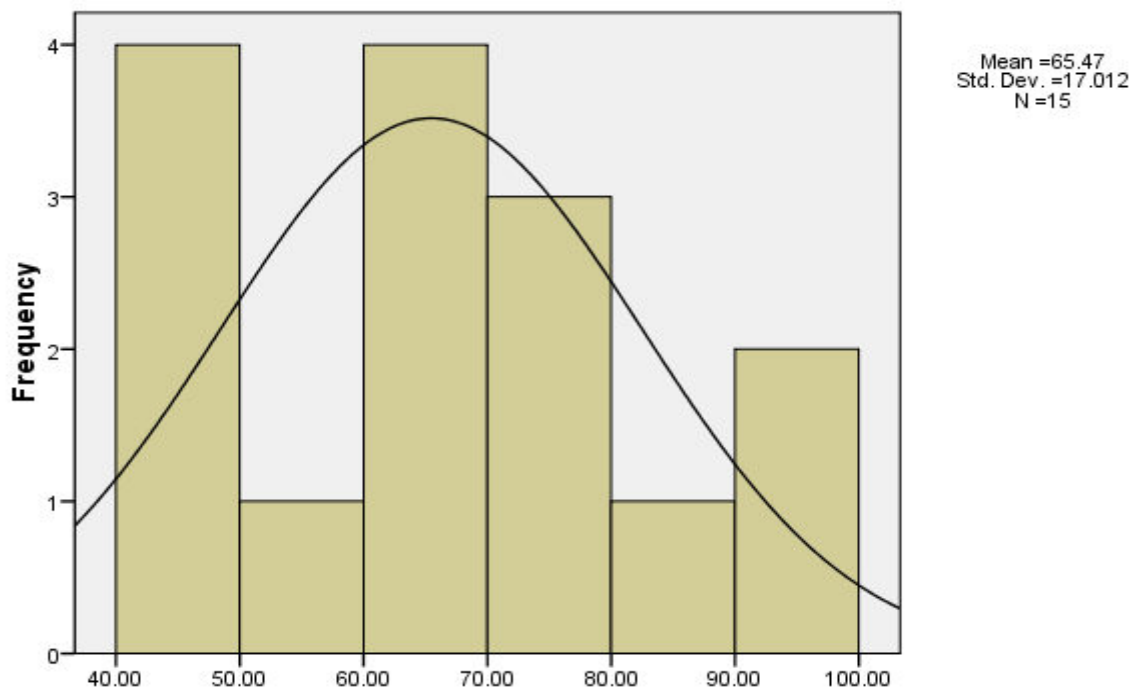


Figure 2: Histogram for post test scores

The Kurtosis value for both groups was negative (-.907 and -.873 for pretests and post test data respectively) suggesting flat top relative to normal distribution for both data. This kurtosis of data set and the near symmetry suggested by these values are verified by the histograms in figure 1 and 2. Taking the standard normal distribution as having a kurtosis of three, these kurtosis values would be said to be low. The low kurtosis values suggest that none of the performance had exceptional distribution. This would suggest that much as cultural awareness could have had an effect on the performance of the students, the possible improvement in performance attributed to the cultural awareness is not an extreme one, as one would have expected difference in kurtosis scores. For instance, considering that the group 1 data had flat distribution, overwhelming effect of cultural awareness programs should have resulted into data set with a sharp peak and a distinct peak near the mean.

9. Discussions

This section continues with the discussions relating to the findings and analysis carried out in the previous section. The portion seeks to put into clearer view on the extent to which culture awareness is important in improving the writing composition in English department students in College of Science and Humanities in Ghaat at Majmaah University. It is worth noting that the respondents' recorded improved results in writing the composition after undergoing a cultural awareness course as can be seen in virtually all the performance indicators. All the statistical performance indicators, right from the mean scores, the standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores, ranges as well as skewness point towards better performance of the group that was exposed to cultural awareness program. Scores in each of these performance indicators serve to verify the other. However, as has been shown, the improvement in performance for the post-test group is just a slight one. The slight improvement in scores of the second group can be attributed to the fact that cultural awareness enhances creativity and communication ability. Communication and creativity are central features of cultural activities while at the same time being at the core of good composition writing (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). As such, students who manage to master these skills are more likely to be better students of English composition writing than their counterparts with less enhanced creative and communication skills. Additionally, realization of the students' culture results into increased critical thinking. This is attributed to the fact that the student will be more imaginative and have a sensitivity of culture in developing the written script. This will be done on the process of improving the communication and reading abilities. From the foregoing discussions, the English teacher are advised to continuously assist the learner in developing their communicative and creative competency through forums culturally stimulating forums such as debates as well as conferences. Moreover, the ability to using a particular language correctly entails the social rules involved in talking in a given community. This calls for one to adequately comprehend the impact of social factors on speech conduct

(Holmes, 2001; Fenghua and Hongxin, 2010) while teaching the learners as this will play a role in understanding the influence of the cultural diversity and how to express oneself to match situational demands. That is to say, most cultures seek to instill discipline. These scholarly observations could explain why exposure to cultural program could influence performance in English composition. The subject call upon students to express themselves as directed (Wang, 2008). It therefore calls for a degree of discipline (it warrant restriction within the instructors instructions). Since the same “discipline” was a key issue during cultural awareness, it is expected that students who have passed through the program will be more conscious to the instructor’s instructions (courtesy of the discipline instilled). The end result is better performance in exams.

Despite promising evidence from this study that exposure to cultural awareness could help improve student’s results, caution should be exercised in using cultural awareness as a mechanism for enhancing performance in English. When it comes to writing, there have been several proposals on how it is handled by different writers (Weijen et al., 2009; Wang and Wen, 2002; Cohen and Brooks-Carson, 2001; Fenghua and Hongxin, 2010). Some have suggested that those who are not are of second language usually tries to write by translating their language directly to the English language (Weijen et al., 2009). This implies that English teachers should recognize English expressions from the learners in English cultural contexts as this will enable them advice the student in making adjustments as required thereby overcoming the errors associated with direct translation (Cohen and Brooks-Carson, 2001; Fenghua and Hongxin, 2010).

10. Conclusions

The study sought to explore the extent to which culture awareness is important in improving writing composition. In order to be able to answer this research question, the research relied on pre-test and post-test results as explained above. In analyzing whether exposure of the students to culture awareness program had an effect on the second group, the study compared key academic performance indicators for the two groups in both pre-test and post-test scores. All statistical indicators used here suggest that exposure of students to cultural awareness program could enhance their English composition writing skills and competence.

11. Recommendations

It is recommended that in order to allow teacher to assist learners from diverse cultural background improve their writing skills, some activities suggested include reading, watching English film, asking for native speaker to attend a classroom section, giving assignment to the learners to meet native speaker, and cross cultural gathering with expatriates. This will play a role in enabling English learners to use English as a way of communicating in several spoken as well as written English contexts. In addition, pedagogical significance for tutoring English as a foreign language ought to consider English cultural aspects which have been incorporated in English teaching-learning activities so as to achieve communicative competence.

11.1 Implications for Future Research

The present study points the need for enquiring further so as to attempt to examine concerning the learner’ individual reading as well as writing ability together with identifying the challenges that they are expiring in the process of writing composition. Therefore it opens up the gap for future research. Furthermore, it uncovers the issue that requires to be cross examined in terms of cultural awareness of as far as the writing aspects is concerned and the actual schemes which is implemented while writing composition. This will assist in developing new strategies of writing composition by the student which will further enhance their writing competency. Lastly, the current research made a partial contribution in trying to comprehend the effect of cultural diversity and writing ability. Therefore additional studies need to be done so as to further explore the effect of cultural variation in other courses which are not necessarily English.

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