

The Viability of Interactive Games in the Teaching of EFL Writing Skills: The Case of Batna-2 University, Algeria

جدوى الألعاب التفاعلية في تدريس مهارات كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية: حالة جامعة

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Abstract: Enhancing literacy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Algeria is an issue of great debate. Constant observation of more than thirteen years of the EFL context has led us to assume that EFL learners do face real hurdles in showing the appropriate command of the target language. This is apparent through their written compositions. Hence, the impetus for the current research project is to shed light on the viability of introducing interactive games in the teaching of EFL writing skills. The investigation seeks to explore two overarching research queries: “how far can interactive games be a viable tool for the teaching of EFL writing skills?” and “to what extent can interactive games enhance learners’ EFL writing literacy?”. To account for these questions, an experimental design has been deployed where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected. A sample of 60 students (30 as a control group and 30 as an experimental group) is randomly chosen from a population of EFL first-year LMD students at Batna-2 University. The results confirm that interactive games could be viable means that contribute positively to enhancing EFL learners’ writing. Thus, the current project endeavors to foster the quality of teaching EFL writing.

Keywords: Literacy; Interactive Games; Writing Skills; EFL learning/teaching processes.

ملخص الدراسة :

يعتبر موضوع تعزيز الإلمام بالقراءة والكتابة لدى طلاب و متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية و اللغات الأجنبية في الجزائر ذو أهمية كبيرة. لقد أدت الملاحظة المستمرة لأكثر من ثلاثة عشر عاما لمجال تعليمية اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للتوصل إلى الفرضية البحثية القائلة بأن الطلاب يواجهون عقبات حقيقية في إظهار الملكات اللغوية المناسبة. وهذا واضح من خلال مباحثهم و مواضعهم المكتوبة. وبالتالي، فإن الدافع لمشروع البحث الحالي هو تسليط الضوء على جدوى إدخال الألعاب التفاعلية في تدريس

مهارات الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. ويسعى البحث إلى استكشاف مبحثين شاملين: "إلى أي مدى يمكن للألعاب التفاعلية أن تكون أداة قابلة للتطبيق لتدريس مهارات الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية؟" و "إلى أي مدى يمكن للألعاب التفاعلية أن تعزز القراءة والكتابة لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؟". و لدراسة هذه التساؤلات، اخترنا منهاجاً تجريبياً حيث يتم جمع البيانات النوعية والكمية على حد سواء. تم اختيار عينة من 60 طالبا (30 كمجموعة ضابطة و 30 مجموعة تجريبية) عشوائياً من عدد طلاب السنة الأولى في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية لجامعة باتنة 2. وتؤكد النتائج أن الألعاب التفاعلية هي بالفعل وسائل مبتكرة تسهم إسهاماً إيجابياً في تعزيز القراءة والكتابة لدى المتعلمين. وبالتالي، فإن المشروع الحالي يسعى إلى تعزيز نوعية تدريس الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية على مستوى الجامعة.

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1 - Introduction

It is believed that all research is based on some underlying assumptions about what constitutes "valid" research and which research method(s) is/are appropriate for the development of knowledge in a given study. Henceforth, the current investigation falls into the realm of real life probes in which the actual intricacies of foreign language teaching and learning contexts are scrutinized in depth. The decision for the present investigation is driven from my personal experience as a practitioner and a teacher in the field of foreign languages. The zeal to carry out the current research has been prompted by constant observation of our foreign language context where the teaching of English writing plays a pivotal role in foreign language acquisition. This investigation, also, has been undertaken essentially to evaluate our current teaching practices with an aim to question the viability of using specific techniques, that is, the interactive games in the teaching of English writing in our EFL context.

Our current research project is well situated in the EFL research context where the aim is to uncover the subtleties of English writing teaching. The teaching of writing has been one of the most important elements in language teaching. Also, teachers are as important agents of change in the reform effort currently underway in education and thus are expected to play a key role in changing educational institutions and classrooms. Paradoxically, however, teachers are also viewed as major obstacles to change because of their adherence to outmoded forms of instruction that emphasize factual and procedural knowledge at the expense of deeper levels of understanding (Prawat, 1992, 354). The teaching of writing in our EFL contexts could be described as traditional and mechanistic where teachers' philosophy of how to teach plays a major part in the process of learners' learnability of literacy rules. From this, the current research will be looking at the viability of

interactive games in the teaching of writing as opposed to the traditional way. Our aim through this project is to introduce new methods and new models for the teaching of writing to enhance foreign language learnability and teachability. We want to introduce the teaching of EFL writing skills through interactive games. Through our constant observation of our EFL contexts, we come to realize that EFL students' attainment in writing is far from the required level, so there was an urge to assess the feasibility of the newly devised approach. The investigation seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How far can interactive games be a viable tool for the teaching of EFL writing skills? 2) To what extent can the interactive games enhance learners' EFL writing literacy?

To answer those questions, we have opted for an experimental research design within a classroom action research that might help us uncover the subtleties of this project. The context of the design will be explained in detail in the research methodology section. In what follows, an account of the literature review related to the viability of interactive games in the teaching of writing will be presented.

2 - Literature Review:

Despite all the work that has been done on first- and second- language acquisition, we know surprisingly little about how languages are learned, and even less about how they can best be taught. Theories come and go, assertions are plentiful, and facts are in short supply. This is nowhere more truly than in the area of writing. The trouble with teaching EFL literacy is that we are never quite sure whether it works or not; its effects are uncertain and hard to assess. Research on methodology is inconclusive and has not shown detectable and lasting effects, for instance, for implicit versus explicit instruction, for inductive versus deductive learning, or for the separated-out study of structure versus incidental focus on form during communicative activity. Undoubtedly, Swan (2006) contended that "languages have structural features that are complicated and hard to learn. For learners to master them, adequate experience, understanding, and use of these features are necessary. Where time is limited and learners have little out-of-class exposure (as in most language teaching situations the world over), this can only be brought about with the help of pedagogical interventions, explicit teaching and systematic practice informed by a syllabus of known problems" (pp. 1-2). So, it could be assumed that EFL writing skills should be taught differently from the mechanistic way aiming for an effective use of language.

The theoretical background of the current study falls into the constructivist paradigm. This latter represents a “revolution” (Goldman, 1989) and a major shift in education. There was a shift from the monotonous way of literacy teaching to a more interactive and active one. There has been much interest in the viability of interactive games in the teaching of writing in recent years. The use of interactive games or activities for the teaching of English writing has its roots in Baudelaire's philosophy which disapproved the mechanistic procedures of teaching writing through what he called “L’aride Grammaire” (Comeau, 1987, 57). Many teachers and learners would probably comply with Baudelaire, for literacy acquisition is often associated with the dry retrospection of rules and the equally dry prospect of applying these rules infill- in the blank, pattern practice, and substitution, transformation, and translation tasks. This stereotypical view of writing study, fortunately, is only partially true. Most modern language textbooks, especially at the primary level, include at least some writing exercises designed to allow students to use English writing in interactive situations.

According to Comeau (1987), cited in Rivers (1987, 57) “the word interactive is derived from the Latin verb “agree”, which means to do, and the Latin preposition “*inter*”, meaning among. An interactive writing exercise, therefore, stresses the teaching of writing through mutual engagement, usually in small groups. It is active rather than passive, learner-led rather than language-focused, cognitive rather than direct, and personal rather than manipulative. Interactive writing games put communication on a standard with exactitude, transforming the learning of EFL writing skills into a social process. The interactive approach frees the teacher as well as the learner. The teacher’s role is to act as a mentor who organizes, encourages, and guides students’ interaction. In practical terms, the teacher prepares and hands-out group assignments, then, circulates from group to group, listening, encouraging, and correcting, when the groups have finished preparing their activities, he or she put together final products. Once in a while teachers will, also, participate in a playful- give and take with students, thus, engaging themselves into the interactive process. Rivers (1987) asserted that teachers who applied interactive games in class, and those who intend to make up their own, should keep these five qualities of good interactive tasks: They should be: “communicative, meaningful, expressive, integrated, and provide a limited choice” (Rivers, 1987, 57-58).

The vast array of games that learners can engage with presents multiple dimensions in which games engage learners. How these games are designed, as well as how they are implemented in the classroom can be organized as to how they relate to learning theory (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2006; Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2004). The use of interactive games in the teaching of writing has been prompted by various reasons among them we can state the following: 1) the desire to harness the motivational power of games in order to make learning fun. 2) A belief that learning through doing in games such as simulations, offers a powerful learning tool. 3) Engagement and motivation have long been established as clear outcomes of using games in the classroom (Joyce, Gerhard, and Derby, 2009). 4) The very nature of games provides three main factors for motivation: fantasy, challenge, and curiosity (Malone, 1981), cited in Groff, Howells, and Cranmer (2010, 13-14).

Teaching EFL literacy through writing does not mean lecturing on grammatical patterns, vocabulary, spelling, and terminology. It does mean bestowing knowledge and being an arbiter of correctness. Teaching EFL writing is the art of helping students make sense, little by little, of a huge puzzling construct, and engaging them in various activities that enhance usage abilities in all skill areas, and promote easy, confident communication.

It is clear from this theoretical background that the use of games in EFL writing teaching presents an opportunity to engage students in activities, which can enhance their learning. Like any successful pedagogy, outcomes need to be well planned and classrooms carefully organized to enable all students to engage in learning. What is notable about using games for learning is the potential they have for allowing learners to bring their existing interests, skills, and knowledge into the classroom and then use games as a hook or stimulus to build the activities for learning around them.

This study is nurtured by the premise that the goal of all language learning is to understand and communicate. The teacher's main task is to direct and facilitate that process. The learner is perceived as an active participant, not merely a passive receiver of rules to be memorized. Therefore, the tasks designs are meant to promote interaction between learners as a bridge to real communication. The teacher also plays a crucial leadership in the EFL writing classroom. Finally, games and activities are important parts of EFL writing teaching. The study of written expression conventions is and should be fun and engaging. The tasks designed are meant to promote independent, active use of the target structures. When playing

games, the atmosphere should be relaxed not competitive. The goal is to enhance learners' learnability and attainment, and the reward is the students' satisfaction in using English to achieve that goal.

3- Method and Tools:

The formulated research questions, the research purposes, and the quality of data required impose the type of the design frame chosen to elicit the evidence needed for this project. The current design opted for in this project is the experimental design with an action research. The reason for choosing this design is that as a teacher, practitioner, and participant in the probe, an urge has been felt to assess a novice teaching method (the use of interactive games in the teaching of EFL writing) and evaluate how far this would lead to positive results. The claim to be given in favor of adopting a classroom action research is that this latter is a research-based form of professional development meant to enhance pedagogical practices.

Traditionally science has privileged knowing through doing. The Cartesian foundation for traditional science is based on the insight that, in doubting, a person can know he thinks and thereby know that he exists. This account of reality privileges individual rationality as the premier vehicle of knowledge and lays the century's deep foundation for the differentiation of knower from what is known. More recent accounts of reality developed especially in the schools of critical theory and pragmatism (Dewey, 1938; Habermas, 1971; James, 1978; Mead, 1932; Rorty, 1999), privilege experience and action insight per se. They draw attention to knowing through doing rather than doubting and emphasize the social nature of all experience and action. Action research is, therefore, an inherently value-laden activity, usually practiced by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world (Reason and Bradbury, 2006, xxv). One cannot simply tell teachers to teach differently. Teachers themselves must make the change. To do so, teachers must "construct a professional knowledge base that will enable them to teach students in more powerful and meaningful ways." (Borko and Putnam, 1995, quoted in Bolam and Mc Mahon, 2004, 49). While there are questions about defining essential knowledge in teaching, given the variations in teaching situations, Shulman (1987) suggested that effective teachers require knowledge in seven areas: content, pedagogy, curriculum, pedagogical content knowledge, learners and their characteristics, educational contexts and educational

ends (Dean, 2014, 134). This study indicates that action research is a facilitating factor for improvements in all seven bases.

To be more specific, action research is a form of inquiry that uses the experience of being committed to trying to improve some practical aspect of a practical situation as a means for developing our understanding of it. It is research conceived and carried out mainly by “insiders”, by those engaged in and committed to the situation, not by outsiders, not by “spectators” (although outside facilitators may also, indeed, have rather an important role to play (Day, Elliott, Somekh and Winter, 2002, 27). Hart and Bond (1995) distinguished six main criteria of action research: 1 educative, 2 deals with individuals as members of social groups, 3 problem-focused, context-specific and future-oriented, 4 aims at improvement and involvement 5 involves a cyclic process in which research, action, and evaluation are interlinked, 6 founded on a research relationship where those involved are participants in the change process.

In addition, experimental design is a specific plan for a research study which includes: First, methods of selecting and assigning subjects and, second, number and types of treatment variables. Experimental designs must include at least two comparison groups with at least one group receiving a treatment (some amount of the independent variable). Its purpose is to design an experimental situation with sufficient controls to conclude that the independent variable(s) cause the dependent variable (Sproull, 1995, 136). Experimentation is a research strategy involving the assignment of subjects to different conditions; manipulation of one or more variables called independent variables by the experimenter. The measurement of the effects of this manipulation on one or more other variables called dependent variables and the control of all other variables. A central feature of the experiment is that you need to know what you are doing before you do it. It is a precise tool that can only map a very restricted range. While all the research strategies may share the goal of providing evidence about causal relationships (that is, about what leads to what). The experiment, defined in this narrow sense, is commonly cited as being the approach of choice for getting at causal relationships (Robson, 1993, 78-79).

The experimental frame within this study is characterized by the procedure applied. The experimental design for this project is based on comparing a sample of 30 students per group (one as a control group and another one as an experimental group) aged 19 (Figure 1.) and taught by two different teachers: Myself and another

teacher. So, we will end up having two different groups randomly chosen and two different teachers. Randomized control trial is used. The teachers used different techniques for the teaching of EFL writing. The experimental group is exposed to the interactive games, and the control group will be applying the traditional techniques. The students are exposed to this treatment for a whole academic year. The students' achievement is assessed before and after the implementation of the new project. A pretest is assigned to both groups. Then, the experimental group is exposed for a period of three months at normal curriculum sessions. A first posttest was assigned, and a second posttest also was administered to follow the progress of the experimental group and finally, a delayed posttest will determine the viability of the use of interactive games in the teaching of EFL writing skills. For data collection, both qualitative and quantitative instruments were used like questionnaires adhering to the SPSS analytical framework. Data analysis is grounded on participant narratives and quantitative results of the questionnaires as well as the students' results of the questionnaires and the students' results of both pretest and posttests. The pattern of pretest and posttests' results has to be investigated to assess the effectiveness of the treatment. After that, it would be significant to claim that the independent variable (the interactive games) is affecting the dependent variable (English writing scores). Generalization is sought through the results. The sample has been chosen based on their availability being my own students. Also, they represent the category in which the scores of the written expression module tended to be below the required standards. This sample represents 09% of the total population, therefore, generalization is sought. Ethical consideration is paramount for this project. An informed consent is given to both teacher and students to ask for their permitted participation. An authorized consent, also, has been granted to carry out the present research from the head of the department. As far as positionality is concerned, it could be admitted that the use of interactive games is an innovative and motivating way for the teaching of EFL writing skills that enhance learners' proficiency level. To sum up, the design frame could be portrayed in the following table:

Table (1): The Research Design Framework

Experimental Design within an Action Research Framework
Broad Purpose of Research

Assess the viability of interactive games in the teaching of EFL writing
<p style="text-align: center;">Design Frame</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Teacher-Researcher Teacher</p> <p>Two different classes (30 students per group): an experimental and a control group Sample: 09% of the total population My own students Mean Age: 19</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Time</p> <p style="text-align: center;">One Academic Year</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Treatment/Intervention</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Pretest/Observation/ Intervention/ Interactive Games:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A Class Magazine A Perfect Story A Shopping Role Play A Class Survey Postcards Poems for the Future Spot the Mistake Songs and Story Telling Lord of the Flies Word Games and Games for the Brain Building Language for Literacy Word Games at the Merriam Webster (Jumble Crossword) Newspaper Activity Advertising Activity Writing Instructions Letter Writing Debating Game</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Observation/Intervention/1st Posttest Observation/Intervention/2nd Posttest Observation/Intervention/3rd Posttest Observation/Intervention/Delayed Posttest</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Observation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Qualitative and Quantitative Data Collection Methods Test Scores and Questionnaire Data</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Data Analysis</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SPSS Analytical Framework Data analysis grounded in participant narratives, field notes, and students' feedback</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Causality</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The impact of interactive games on the teaching of EFL writing The research process helps to construct teacher knowledge in pedagogy</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Ethics</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Negotiated with the principal and the teacher being observed Written consent for both teacher and students</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Generalizability</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Levels of generalization are sought despite the limited sample</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Positionality</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The use of interactive games enables students to enhance their English writing learnability Interactive Games are a viable tool for the teaching of EFL literacy</p>

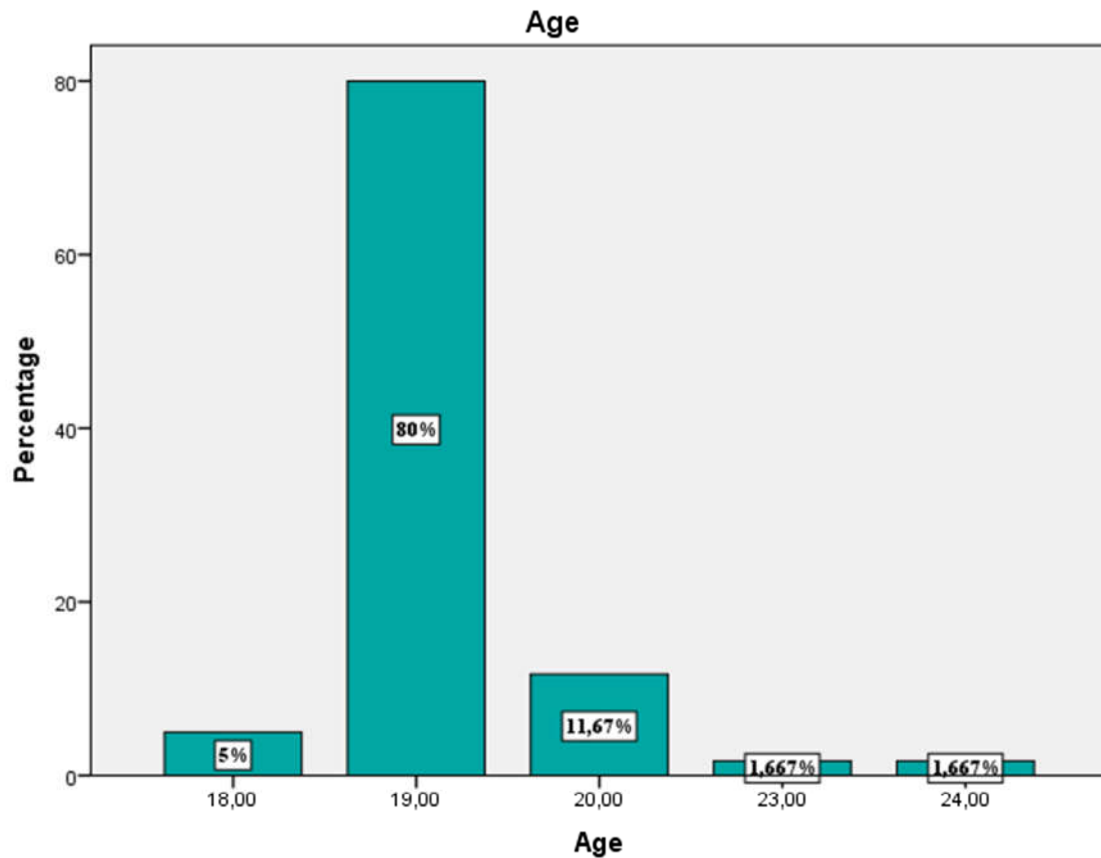


Figure (1) : Age Distribution

4- Results and Discussion

The results of the current investigation could be sectioned under two subheadings: Findings from questionnaire data and tests' scores data.

1. Findings from Questionnaire Data:

1.1.Item One:

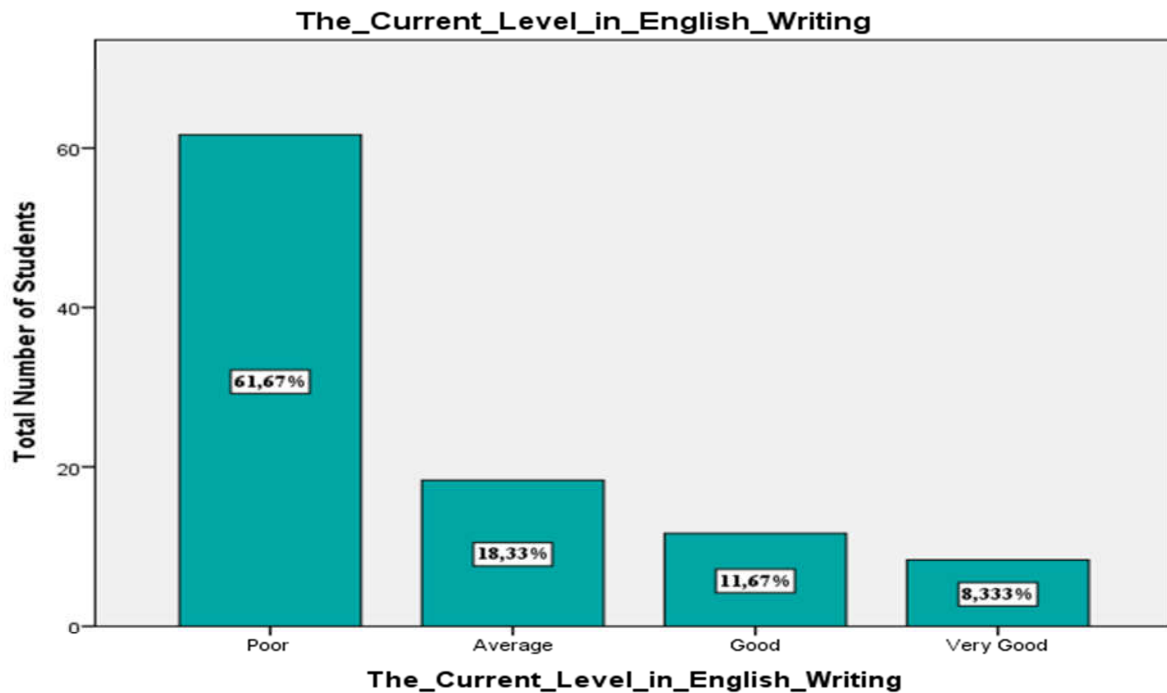


Figure (2): The Current level of Students English Writing

The results show that the students claim to have very poor English in terms of writing with a rate of 61.67% as compared to 18.33% who asserted that they have an average level. Nonetheless, both 11.67% and 8.33% of the students claim that their level in English writing ranges from good to very good orderly. Thus, it could be assumed that first-year EFL students' level in writing in the English department at Batna-2 University is far from meeting the standards.

1.2.Item Two:

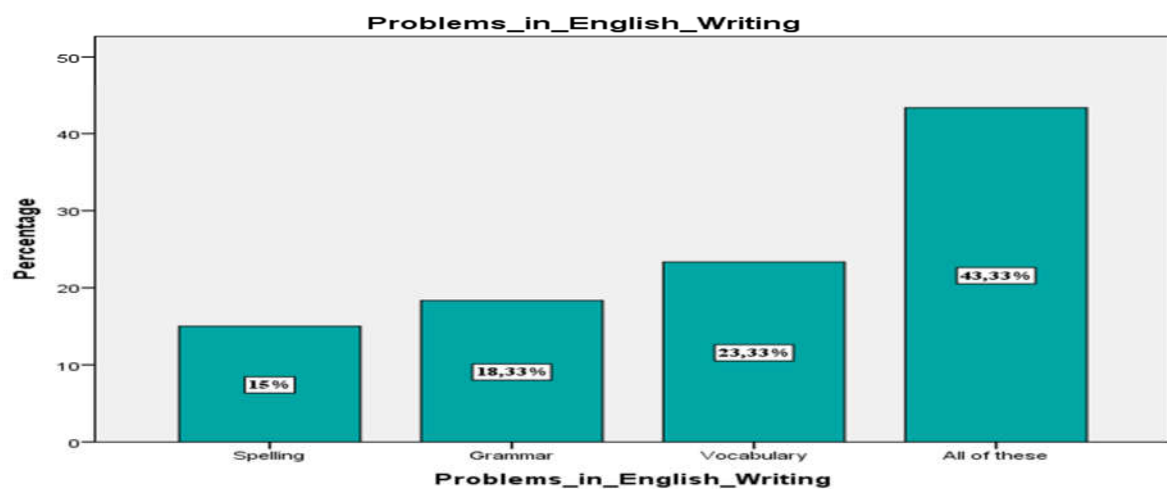


Figure (3): The Kind of Problems EFL students Face in Writing

It has been found throughout the current study that 43.33% of the students face real problems in all criteria of writing, namely, spelling, grammar, correctness, appropriateness, vocabulary, and having no prior knowledge about the topic. This is opposed to an important rate of 23.33% of the students who claim to have difficulties in vocabulary only. This evidences the fact that EFL students at Batna-2 University do face real hurdles in writing. These results are supported by the following item whereabout learners allude this to the fact that the type of teaching they are exposed to is mechanistic (Figure 4).

1.3.Item Three:

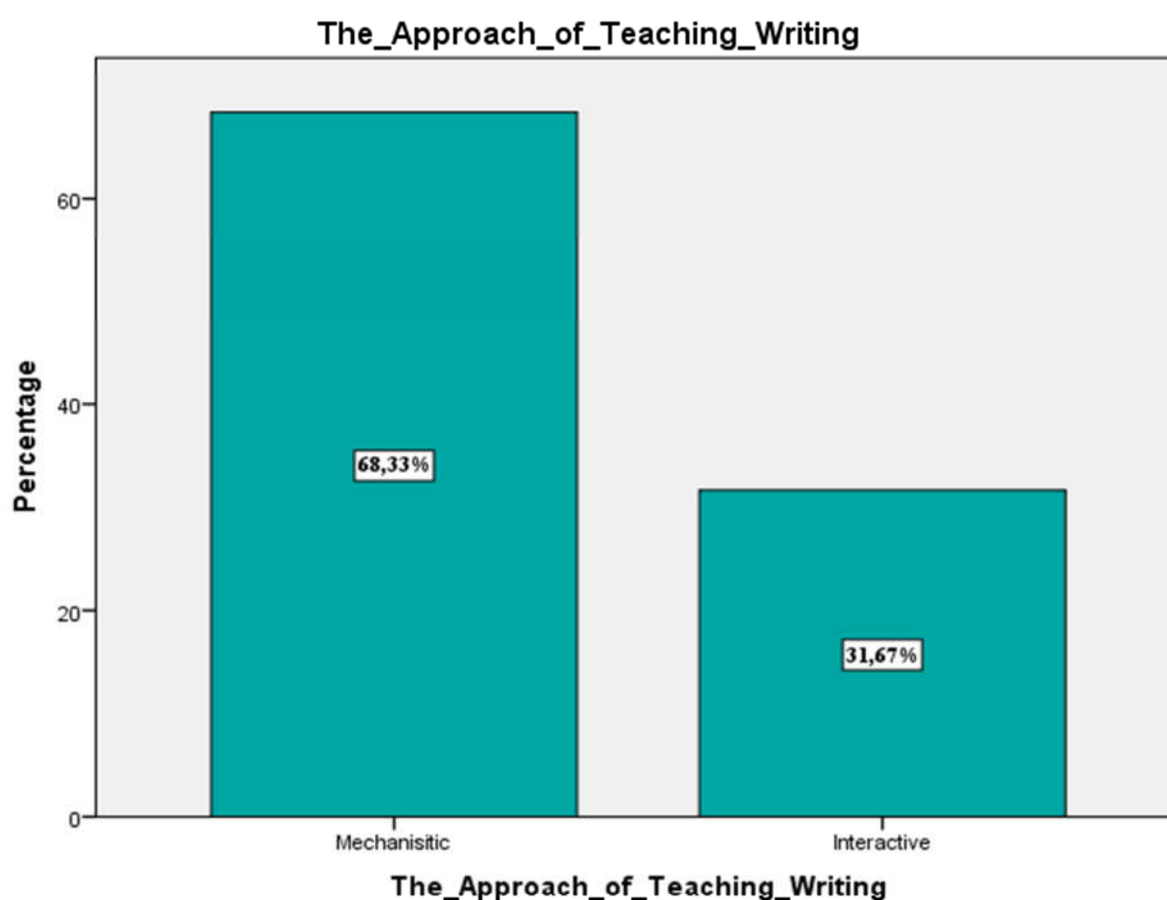


Figure (4): The Types of Approaches in Teaching Writing

Indeed, there is a good match between the data presented above and the current ones in that it supports the assumption that 68.33% of the students confirmed being exposed to mechanistic approaches of teaching writing as opposed to 31.67% which tends to be an interactive approach.

1.4.Item Four: Students' Perceptions about the Use of Interactive Games as a Teaching Tool:

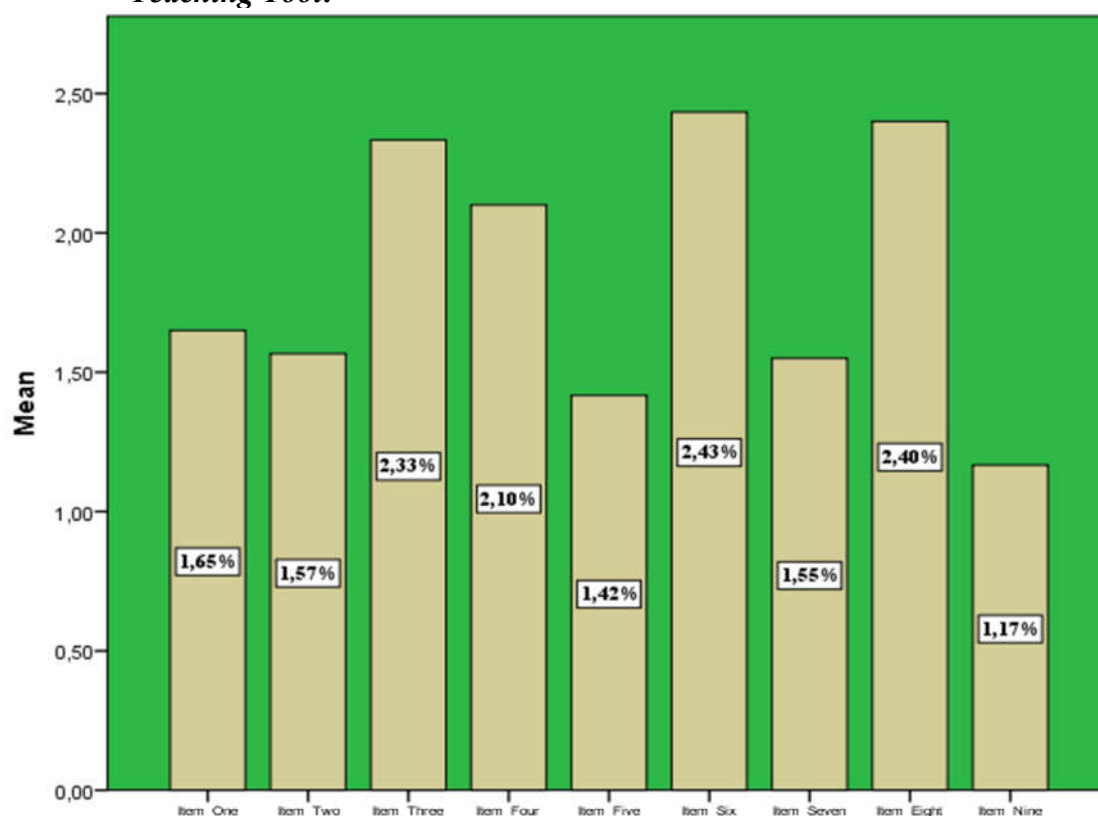


Figure (5): Students' Perceptions about the Use of Interactive Games as a Teaching Tool:

Strongly Agree	1
Agree	2
Neutral	3
Disagree	4
Strongly Disagree	5

From the above graph, it is clear that the majority of the students strongly agreed that the use of interactive games give students a sense of self-confidence through understanding different genres of texts in English and the use of this latter fosters their ability to learn. It is, also, evident that the majority of the students in the English department at Batna-2 University agreed upon the fact that they learn better through the interactive games and their use develops their ability to use the target language in communicative situations. However, the students confirmed with a total agreement that the use of traditional methods would inhibit the progress of their writing skill. Furthermore, the students confirmed that the use of interactive games is a motivating way to learn how to write as well as it propels

their critical thinking and it is a means to meet their future expectations. To back up these results, the following section of tests' scores data is going to confirm the different perceptions and assertions.

2. Tests' Scores Data:

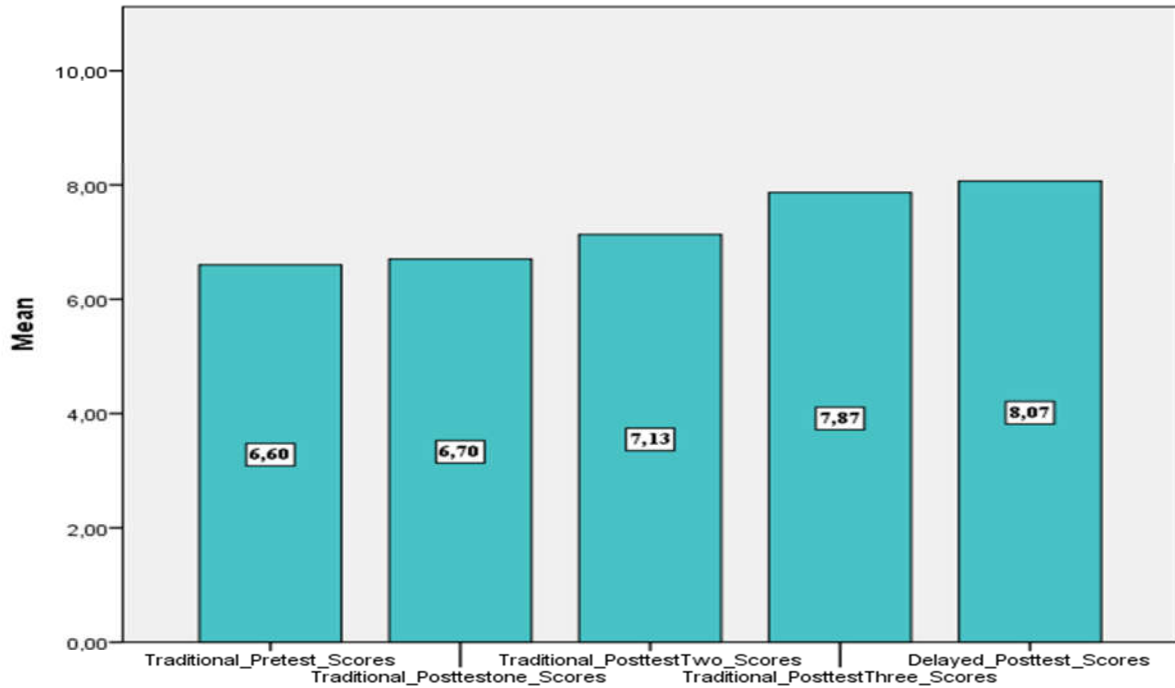


Figure (6) : Control Group Scores

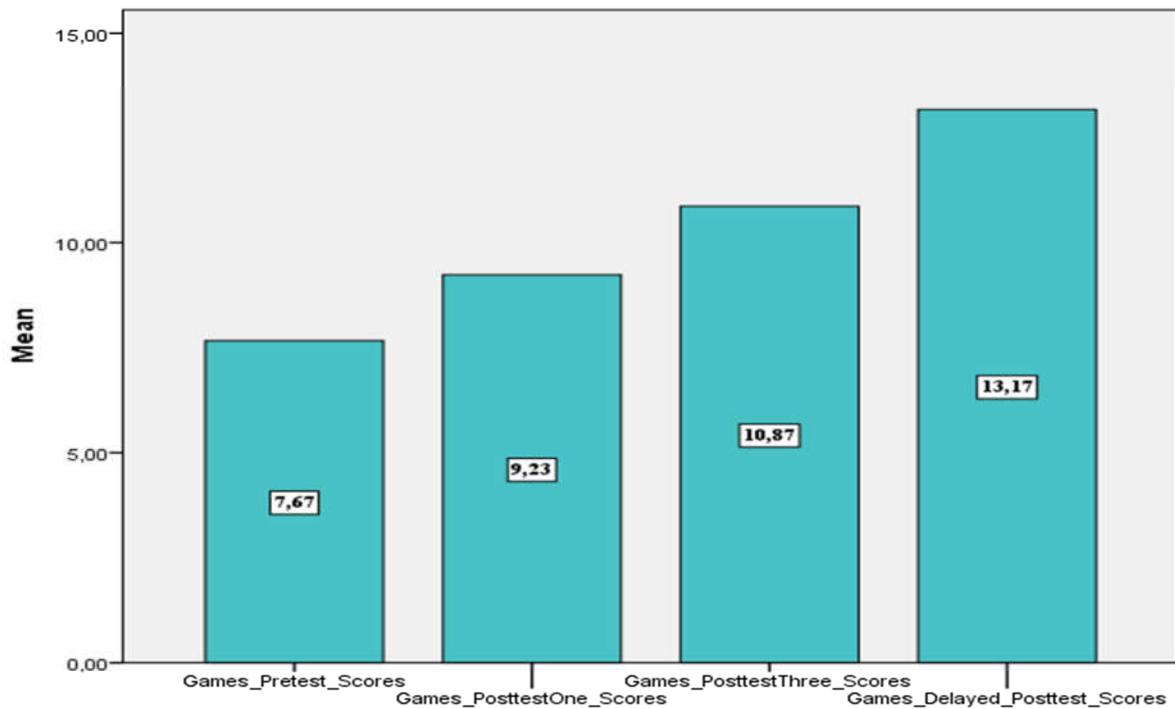


Figure (7) : Experimental Group Scores

It is evident from the current results that EFL learners' writing performance has significantly increased after exposing learners to the different interactive games. The quantitative and qualitative results of the current study confirmed that EFL learners at Batna-2 University do face real hurdles to obtain the appropriate command of English despite the appealing motives and drives of the pedagogic staff. The use of interactive games in the teaching of English writing has proved appealing whereabout learners' scores positively shifted to attain almost 14 out of 20. Nonetheless, the control group writing performance has noticed a steady progress with still scores below the average. This, indeed, is an evidence that the implementation of the interactive games has contributed tremendously in achieving high scores.

This study is a modest contribution to the ongoing discussions and debates about the use of innovative materials and approaches. Both questionnaire and tests' results confirmed that our EFL students at Batna-2 University do have real impediments in using English through writing. The data obtained confirmed that the types of difficulties faced are a wide array due to the mediocrity of the teaching approaches applied. Students claimed that their use of the newly devised pedagogy is a motivating and fostering tool for their competencies and mainly it enhances their writing literacy. The main concern of the presented data was to shed light and draw the attention of both practitioners and policymakers to the alarming situation of our students and the need for an urgent solution through integrating interactive games as a substitute for the outdated models. This paper has presented an innovative view about the teaching of writing skills in our EFL context. Nonetheless, the main limitation of the experimental result is that the sample is a little bit small due to some managerial problems.

Henceforth, to answer the raised queries, it could be assumed that the present study has confirmed that indeed interactive games are viable tools for the teaching of EFL writing skills. The implementation of the new approach has contributed significantly to enhancing the learners' writing literacy.

4- Conclusion

From the research that has been carried out, it is possible to conclude that the integration of interactive games in the teaching of EFL writing has been proved successful. The findings of this research are quite convincing and, thus, the following conclusions could be drawn:

1. The use of interactive games in teaching writing, not only enhances their literacy but also their critical thinking skills, reading, and communicative practices.
2. Learners of the 21st Century are the ones that favor learning into action, or rather by doing.
3. The use of interactive games could foster learners' writing skill and by extension the acquisition of the target language.
4. Data have confirmed that the application of interactive games in the EFL classroom could be beneficial and of practical relevance to both learners and teachers.

On the basis of the promising findings presented in this paper, work on expanding this research to other levels maybe the more advanced one could be an issue of further interest.

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Appendix (A)**Questionnaire**

Dear Students,

You are kindly invited to fill in this questionnaire to help the author gather information needed for the investigation about the viability of interactive games in the teaching of EFL writing skills. Information provided will be used only for research purposes, and your contribution will remain anonymous.

Thank You

Dr. Guerza, R.

Background: Please, tick (✓) appropriately

- Gender

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>
- Age :

Please, tick (✓) appropriately:

1/Item 1: How do you qualify your current level in English Writing?

- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Very Good

2/Item 2: What kind of problems do you have in English Writing?

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Correctness of Style
- Appropriateness
- Vocabulary
- No prior Knowledge about the topic
- All of these

3/ Item 3: How do you qualify the approach of teaching Writing?

- Mechanistic
- Interactive

4/ Item 4: Students' Perceptions about the Use of Interactive Games as a Teaching Tool:

Perceptions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The use of interactive games gives students a sense of self-confidence through understanding different genres of texts in English					
2. The use of interactive games fosters learners' ability to write.					
3. Learners learn better through interactive games.					
4. The use of interactive games develops learners' ability to use the target language in communicative situations.					
5. The use of interactive games is a motivating way to learn how to write in English.					
6. The use of traditional methods in the teaching of writing inhibits the progress of my					

writing skills.					
7. Through the use of interactive games, EFL students generate competencies in writing and critical reading.					
8. Using interactive games in the EFL classroom propels our critical thinking ability.					
9. Teaching English writing through interactive games meets our future expectations as a digital generation.					

Thank You