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A Contract Learning-Based Strategy for Developing Essay Writing and Attitudes towards English Language Writing among Pre-Master Degree in Education Students

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Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of utilizing a contract learning-based strategy in developing essay writing and attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students. The participants were randomly assigned to one hundred students for the experimental group and one hundred students for the control group. Three instruments were used for data collection: a grading contract (A & B), an essay writing test and an attitudes scale towards English language writing. The experimental group was taught using the contract learning-based strategy for three months, while the control group was taught an English language course in the conventional method. Data collected through the pre and post administration of the instruments was treated by t-test. The results revealed that the post-performance of the experimental group significantly exceeded its pre-performance and the post-performance of the control group. Consequently, the results verified the study hypotheses. They proved the effectiveness of the contract learning-based strategy in developing EFL essay writing and positive attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students.

Keywords: strategy, contract learning, essay writing, attitudes.

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إستراتيجية قائمة على التعلم بالتعاقد لتنمية كتابة المقال والاتجاهات نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب درجة تمهيدي الماجستير في التربية

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ملخص

استهدفت الدراسة الحالية التعرف على فاعلية استخدام إستراتيجية قائمة على التعلم بالتعاقد في تنمية كتابة المقال والاتجاهات نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب درجة تمهيدي الماجستير في التربية. وقد قامت الباحثة باختيار العينة عشوائياً وتقسيمها إلى مجموعتين: مائة طالباً وطالبة للمجموعة التجريبية و مائة طالباً وطالبة للمجموعة الضابطة، وتم استخدام ثلاث أدوات لجمع البيانات وهي: عقد اتفاق (في صورتين أ أو ب) واختبار لكتابة المقال ومقياس للاتجاهات نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. وقد قامت الباحثة بتطبيق الاستراتيجية القائمة على التعلم بالتعاقد على المجموعة التجريبية لمدة ثلاثة شهور، بينما تم التدريس للمجموعة الضابطة بالطريقة المعتادة لنفس المدة.وقد عولجت البيانات التي تم جمعها بالتطبيق القبلي والبعدي لأدوات البحث باستخدام (اختبار ـت). وأثبتت النتائج تحقيق المجموعة التجريبية مستوى أفضل في الأداء البعدي عن الأداء القبلي لنفس المجموعة، وكذلك عن الأداء البعدي للمجموعة الضابطة في إختبار الكتابة و في مقياس الاتجاهات نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية . وبذلك تكون النتائج قد أكدت صحة فروض الدراسة، وأثبتت فاعلية الإستراتيجية القائمة على التعلم بالتعاقد في تنمية كتابة المقال والاتجاهات الإيجابية نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب درجة تمهيدي الماجستير في التربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إستراتيجية/ التعلم بالتعاقد/ كتابة المقال/ اتجاهات.

A Contract Learning-Based Strategy for Developing Essay Writing and Attitudes towards English Language Writing among Pre-Master Degree in Education Students

1. Introduction

Teachers' methods of assessing students' performance play an essential role in shaping the direction of teaching and learning, orienting students' perception of workload and task demands, especially in the field of teaching and learning foreign languages including English language. Using regular methods for assessment often causes academic stress and fear of failure, even concerning higher education students. This problem requires the implementation of other alternative formative assessment approaches that help in reducing students' academic stress, inspire their self-confidence, motivate them to improve their performance, and develop their positive attitudes in general, and towards English language writing in particular. One of these recently used alternative assessment approaches is contract grading or contract learning.

Contract grading is a social agreement between a teacher or an instructor and his/her class about how grades are estimated (Inoue, 2019). The principle that contract grading is based on is that most students can achieve proficiency in their performance. The goal is not to reach equality of outcome among students but to reach the best possible fulfilment of the potential (Ward, 2021, p.2). Moreover, contract grading can help students have clear expectations, awareness of the requirements and more collaboration during the assessment process (Litterio, 2018, p.5).

Little (2007, pp.24-25) distinguished three essential pedagogical principles that should be observed by teachers when a learning contract is held between a teacher or an instructor and a student: learning involvement, learner reflection and target language use. Learner involvement requires the full involvement of students in planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning. Learner reflection refers to helping students continuously to reflect on the process of learning and their involvement in self-assessment. While target language use demands the use of the target language as a medium and the goal of learning at the same time.

Contract grading -as an assessment practice- corresponds with the process-oriented approach used in teaching writing. It focuses on the process rather than the final product of writing. It is also based on the critical pedagogy in establishing a certain classroom environment that allows students to have a vital role in the decision-making process. Thus, grading becomes a democratic process that encourages students' active involvement in determining the quality of their writing and grades instead of just receiving the teacher-generated assessment criteria. Accordingly, contract grading can be used in various ways in the writing classrooms to improve students' writing, the teacher-student relationship and the whole classroom environment as well (Litterio, 2016, p.1).

Learning contract assignment is not considered by some students as hundred percent autonomous learning. Students still need to present evidence of achieving their required learning outcome, and they still have regulations to follow. However, a learning contract is still viewed by them as a useful and helpful entry for self-learning, and for developing certain language skills, including writing (Chan, 2016, p.160). In addition, contract learning can achieve individualized and self-criterion-referenced assessment in measuring students' progress. Therefore, contract learning can actually be a promising moderator between students' assessment and their learning (Zandi, 2016, p.425).

Moreover, writing is one of the main skills in EFL learning that is considered one of the signs of academic success since it is an active, productive and inventive skill (Vonna, Mukminatien & Laksmi, 2015, p.227). It demands having capable writers who should be creative and obtain communicative and reflective skills at the same time (Piamsai, 2020, p.228). Good writers should have the capability to write different types including the descriptive, narrative, expository and persuasive type (Huy, 2015, pp.54-55). They should also follow the stages of writing including: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. These stages involve having certain skills embedded in essential components concerning the accurate use of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, as well as how to adhere the whole work coherently and how to create original ideas (Ikawati, 2020, p.54). As mentioned before, the written work itself is considered the outcome of various cognitive procedures that should be followed precisely including: planning, drafting, revising and editing (Gong, Tan & Chin, 2018, p.124).

To the best of the present researcher's knowledge, no experimental study attempted to investigate the effectiveness of utilizing a contract learning-based strategy in developing essay writing and attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students. Therefore, the present study was conducted to fill this gap that remained unexamined for decades since the first emergence of contract learning (Ward,2021). Moreover, this effort might encourage other teachers and instructors to implement contract grading to support students' performance in English language writing, develop their attitudes towards English language writing, and improve their sense of responsibility towards their learning.

1.1   Context of the Problem

First, in the light of the researcher's long experience in teaching the English language course of the Pre-Master Degree in Education at the faculty of Graduate Studies for Education at Cairo University, she observed the students' insufficiency in the essay writing skills required in their English language course. Contract learning can be used in college classrooms because instructors often have a suitable deal of autonomy to select and implement alternative approaches for assessment to develop students' skills.

Second, the results of the previous studies (e.g.: Chan 2015, Zandi 2015, Litterio 2016, Litterio 2018, Ward 2021 & Ward 2021) stressed the need of implementing alternative assessment approaches rather than the regular ones. The regular grading system often causes frustration, stress and lack of self-confidence. On the other hand, contract grading helps students to outline their performance criteria by inviting them to collaborate in their assessment and select the criteria that correlate with their desired goals and abilities. In addition, it can reduce students' perceptions of academic stress as mentioned before.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

The problem of the current study could be expressed in the need of pre-master degree in education students for a certain effective strategy to assist them develop their English language essay writing required in their English language course, by challenging their abilities and skills instead of threatening them, causing their stress and failure. This strategy could be based on contract learning as an alternative approach for assessment.

Accordingly, the current study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the contract items agreed upon by pre-master degree in education students concerning their English language essay writing components?
2. What are the features of the contract learning-based strategy to develop English language essay writing components among pre-master degree in education students?
3. What is the effectiveness of the contract learning-based strategy in developing the assigned English language essay writing components among pre-master degree in education students?
4. What is the effectiveness of the contract learning-based strategy in developing the attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students?

1.3 Aims of the Study

The current study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of a contract learning-based strategy in developing English language essay writing and attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The current study expected to:

1. Improve English language essay writing among pre-master degree in education students.
2. Assist English language instructors and teachers to benefit from the proposed strategy in developing English language essay writing among their students.
3. Encourage English language instructors to adopt other alternative assessment approaches for evaluating their students' performance rather than the regular ones.
4. Pave the way for other studies in the EFL field that utilize contract learning in improving students' language main skills.

1.5   Study Hypotheses

The study hypotheses were stated as follows:

1. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of experimental group students' performance on the pre-administration and post-administration of the English language essay writing test as a whole and in each writing component in favour of the post-administration of the test.
2. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of experimental group students' performance and control group students' performance on the post-administration of the English language essay writing test as a whole and in each writing component, in favour of experimental group students' performance.
3. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of experimental group students' performance on the pre-administration and post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing in favour of the post-administration of the scale.
4. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of experimental group students' performance and control group students' performance on the post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing in favour of experimental group students' performance.

1.6   Delimitations of the Study

The study is defined to:

1. A sample of 200 pre-master degree in education students, Faculty of Graduate Studies for Education at Cairo University, was assigned as the study sample. The sample was randomly divided into two groups: 100 students as an experimental group, and the other 100 students as a control group. The students belonged to different departments and specializations, namely: Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Foundations, Psychological Counselling, Educational Psychology, Special Education, Higher and Continuing Education and Educational Technology.

2. Developing the descriptive and persuasive types of English language essay writing as they are the most frequently required two types of pre-master degree in education students.

3. Five writing components (content, organization, vocabulary, structure and mechanics) were selected in the current study in the light of the agreement of the students.

4. The proposed strategy was implemented in teaching the students' English language course during the first semester of the academic year: 2022-2023 (for three months, three hours per week).

1.7   Terminology

Some terms were repeatedly used in this study as follows:

1.7.1. Strategy

Shehata and El-Nagar (2014, p.39) defined it as a selection of measures and practices the teacher or instructor adheres to in order to achieve certain outcome in the light of the required objectives. El-Wakeel and El-Mofty (2016, p.341) defined it as a group of rules that are used by the teacher and his students to achieve certain objectives. Strategy is defined operationally in the current study as a series of procedures in accordance with the contract learning approach that are followed by the instructor and her pre-master degree in education students to develop their English language essay writing and their attitudes towards English language writing.

1.7.2. Contract Learning

Chan (2015, p.151) defined it as an agreement between the teacher or instructor and the learner about establishing English learning objectives, and the means to achieve these objectives. Ward (2021, p.1) defined it as a grading practice that outlines the performance criteria or the specific actions and responses that are needed to earn each grade. It is based on inviting students to participate in their assessment by selecting the criteria that correspond with their abilities and the desired goal. Learning contract is defined in the present study as an agreement between the instructor and the pre-master degree in education students about the accepted performance criteria required to earn a certain grade in English language essay writing.

1.7.3. Essay Writing

Guo and Ouyang (2010, p.137) defined it as a piece of writing that analyses and assesses a topic or issue in a disciplined way. Connelly (2013, p.201) defined it as a number of organized paragraphs that back a particular idea. Essay writing is defined in the current study as a piece of writing that includes organized paragraphs of about 150-200 words that tackle a certain issue in English language for pre-master degree in education students.

1.7.4. Attitudes

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2001, p.71) defined them as opinions and directions a person has towards something, and shown through behaviour. Ibnian (2009, p.17) defined them as reactions and responses students have towards English language learning. Attitudes are defined in the present study as the opinions and reactions of pre-master degree in education students towards English language essay writing.

2. Literature Review

Contract learning is used more in college classrooms than schools because instructors often have more freedom to implement unconventional assessment approaches (Ward, 2021, p.1). In general, only a few studies have examined the use of contract learning in EFL contexts, including EFL writing classes (Zandi, 2015, p.411).

Chan (2015) aimed at developing 57 first year undergraduate students' awareness and ability to achieve autonomous learning. So, students were asked to do self-access work in an English course through writing a learning contract, defining their learning objectives and submitting evidence of their learning throughout the course of the semester. The study examined the items of the learning contract and the learning objectives in terms of the four main EFL skills. A questionnaire was also applied to determine whether university students in Hong Kong were ready for autonomous learning or not. The study indicated the readiness of the students for autonomous learning and suggested ways to deal with the challenges that might delay the language learners' autonomy.

Zandi (2015) used a mixed-methods design to investigate its effectiveness in providing feedback to 14 Iranian graduate students majoring in different fields concerning their English as a foreign language course. The design was also used to develop students' self-directed learning, through using learning contracts, and to study students' impression of the assessment procedure. A diagnostic test of grammatical knowledge was applied, learning contracts were held as part of the received treatment, then a post-test and an open-ended questionnaire were applied to the students. The used design proved to have a positive effect on students' grammar learning, their attitudes towards contract learning, as well as their studying behaviour. The study concluded with a discussion on the validity considerations of utilizing contract learning in assessing learners.

Litterio (2016) examined how 20 university students collaborated together in a technical writing classroom in the northeast of America in order to create criteria to the quality of their writing assignments. Open-ended surveys and classroom observations were used. The study indicated that although students reached better performance and more involvement in their grading process, they resisted participation in generating their assessment criteria as a class. They preferred using regular grading methods generated by their teacher. The study concluded with suggestions for incorporating contract grading in the writing classrooms.

Based on the previous study, Litterio (2018) conducted another study on the contract grading system. The study included full involvement of 18 undergraduate students, with six different majors, in generating classroom criteria and self-assessment for each assignment. The results of the study displayed that those students welcomed being involved in all aspects of their assessment. The study concluded with practical suggestions and recommendations to continue experimentation with contract grading.

Ward (2021) analysed the effect of contract grading on Good Shepherd High School Students' annual research paper. The participants were 53 students enrolled in one of seven senior-level English courses. While three maintained a regular grading rubric generated by the teacher, four sections were assessed with mastery-based grading contracts for A or B. The results of data collection revealed that the contract grading group significantly perceived the workload and time constraints as less demanding. The majority (84%) fulfilled the contract's requirements, and the experimental group earned six times as many A

grades and two and half times as many B grades as those in the control group. Thus, the grading contract significantly proved to reduce the stress of workload demands and improve grades of the experimental group.

Ward (2021) conducted another study on 439 high school students. She examined the effect of mastery-based contract grading on students' perceptions of stress and threat of assessment while completing a writing assessment in their required English course. Interviews and four psychometrically sound scales were used for data collection. The findings revealed that the contract significantly reduced students' threat of assessment. Students perceived workload demands as significantly less stressful and threatening under the contract. Therefore, the researcher suggested the implementation of mastery-based contract grading in high school classrooms in order to create a healthy learning environment that could be challenging instead of being threatening.

General comment on the related studies

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the present study is the first one in the Egyptian context that investigated the effectiveness of a contract learning-based strategy in developing essay writing and attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students. Moreover, some factors that affect the effectiveness of utilizing contract learning in the development of EFL writing and post-graduate students' attitudes towards writing in the Egyptian context should be defined, examined and analysed.

However, previous studies were beneficial for the researcher of the present study, since they proved the effectiveness of contract learning in developing learners' autonomy, grammar learning, positive attitudes and their studying behaviour. They also proved that contract learning helped in reducing learners' stress of workload demands, threat of assessment, and in creating a healthy learning environment that could be challenging rather than threatening. Moreover, the studies also proved the effectiveness of contract learning in improving learners' grades in general. Based on the above, further studies were needed to investigate the effectiveness of using contract learning in developing English language skills and vocabulary learning in the Egyptian context in the pre-tertiary level, and in the college level, as instructors often have a suitable deal of autonomy that enables them to select and implement alternative approaches of assessment.

3. Method

3.1 Design

The present study used the quasi-experimental method. It adopted the two groups pre-post test experimental design. Thus, it implemented a pre-post essay writing test and a pre-post attitudes scale.

3.2 Participants

The participants were two hundred post-graduate students who were enrolled in the pre-master degree in education during the first semesters of the academic year 2022/2023. Students attended 36 hours in the semester (three hours per week) studying an English language course about the craft of writing a research. The students came from seven different specialisations; namely: Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Foundations, Psychological Counselling, Educational Psychology, Special Education, Higher and Continuing Education, and Educational Technology. Their age ranged between twenty-five and thirty years old. It was expected that they would complete this course as a partial requirement for attaining their Master Degree in Education after passing the theoretical courses exams of this academic year successfully.

3.3 Materials and Instruments of the Study

The current study used the following essential material:

3.3.1. The essay writing contract:

Aim of the contract

The contract aimed at identifying the students' perception of the learning objectives for their EFL essay writing assignments, and turning these objectives into specific achievable items in the contract related to the main components of English language essay writing; namely: Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Structure, and Mechanics.

Description of the contract

While the control group students were assessed in a conventional holistic way generated by their teacher, the experimental group students were assessed

with two contracts created and agreed upon by the students themselves: one for mastery (A), and another for proficiency (B). All items on the B contract were concrete and attainable, while the A contract included qualities of high-standard writing. Both A and B contracts asked for the same quantity of work, but different quality. Students created -with the assistance of their instructor- both of the two contracts. Then, each student selected one of the two contracts, as his/her own. The researcher registered the students' selection (either Contract A or B) in order to check at the end of the intervention whether the experimental group students could achieve the required grades of the selected contract in the post-administration of the essay writing test or not. The goal of having two contracts instead of one was that all students -even those who had formerly obtained low grades on their essay writing tests or assignments- would be able to achieve at least proficiency.

Assessing the assignments with the contract

To grade students' work using the contract, students gave each contract item 5 grades. Consequently, the average of the grades provided at the end an analytical assessment of the paper in Contract A as 'High' for 75 grades, 'Medium' for 70 grades and 'Low' for 65 grades out of 80 total grade. As for Contract B, the analytical assessment of the paper was estimated as 'High' for 60 grades, 'Medium' for 55 grades and 'Low' for 50 grades (see Appendix 1).

Added to the essay writing contract, the study used the following instruments:

3.3.2. The English language essay writing test:

Aim of the test

The test aimed at measuring the English language essay writing components of pre-master degree in education students.

Description of the test

The test was built in the light of the students' writing contract. It contained an essay question about one of the educational problems that exists in the Egyptian context, and how to solve it. The test duration was estimated by summing the times of twenty students, different from the study group, divided

by their number. Thus, the time allotted for the test was forty-five minutes (see Appendix 2).

Test validity

The test was presented to specialized jury members in the field of Curriculum and EFL Methodology to evaluate it in terms of agreement of the test question with its aim, and the suitability of the test question and its instructions to the students' English language proficiency level. Accordingly, the test was approved by the jury members.

Test reliability

To guarantee the test reliability, the test-retest method was applied first to twenty students other than the experimental and control groups. The reliability coefficient was 0.84, which was considered high.

Test scoring

The test was scored according to the items of the contract grading agreed upon, which are related to the main components of English language essay writing; namely: Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Structure, and Mechanics, except item (16) which was deleted (see Appendix 1). Consequently, the total grade of the pre-post essay writing test was seventy-five grades.

3.3.3. The attitudes scale towards English language writing:

Aim of the scale

The scale aimed at measuring the attitudes of pre-master degree in education students towards English language writing.

Description of the scale

The scale was built in the light of the literature review. It contained -in its final version- twenty item, taking into consideration having ten positive items and ten negative items to guarantee objectivity. The scale duration was estimated by summing the times that twenty students, other than the study group, took to answer the scale divided by their number. Thus, the time estimated for answering the scale was thirty minutes.

Scale validity

To guarantee the scale validity, it was shown to specialized jury members in the fields of Curriculum and EFL Methodology, as well as Educational Psychology. They examined the scale items in terms of: relevance, suitability, and clarity of the scale items and instructions. Accordingly, some of the scale items formation was modified in the light of their advices.

Scale reliability

To guarantee the scale reliability, it was applied to a group of twenty students, other than the study group. The reliability coefficient was estimated using Cronbach Alpha Formula. The value was estimated (0.86) which was considered relatively high.

Scale scoring

The instrument was a five-point Likert-Scale. Participants -whether the experimental group or the control group- were asked to express their attitudes towards English language writing through stating how much they agree with each scale item. Their degree of agreement ranged from Strongly agree = 5 to Agree = 4 to Uncertain = 3 to Disagree = 2 to Strongly disagree = 1 for positive items; and from Strongly agree = 1 to Agree = 2 to Uncertain = 3 to Disagree = 4 to Strongly disagree = 5 for negative items.

3.3.4 The proposed strategy

In order to achieve the objectives of the contract grading in terms of essay writing, these procedures were followed during the English language lectures:

Stage 1: Prewriting

First, the instructor asked some questions as a kind of warm-up. Then, she encouraged the students to read a text about one of the course six main topics; namely: How to plan your research?, Kinds of sources and their uses, How to evaluate sources for relevance and reliability?, Principles of quoting, paraphrasing and summarizing, and Guarding against inadvertent plagiarism. Second, students began to discuss each topic with their instructor, asking, answering questions and generating new ideas and solutions. Third, each

student wrote his ideas and arranged them in groups. Fourth, each student wrote his/her essay, including an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Stage 2: Drafting

Students wrote their first draft in the light of their selected contract items (proficiency-based contract grading: either Contract A or Contract B). The instructor informed the students to write their drafts in a double-space for self or peer revision.

Stage 3: Revising

In this stage, students reread their essays. They could add, delete, substitute or modify in what they wrote. Besides self-revision, the revising stage included also peer-revision. One of the student's colleagues volunteered revising his/her essay using a pencil in writing his/her remarks. The content and organization of ideas were focused on during that stage.

Stage 4: Editing

This stage was accomplished at home. Students proofread their essays in the light of the contract items. The modifications concentrated on spelling, structure, capitalization and punctuation. Students checked their essays word by word. Then, they rewrote the essay again in a neat way.

Stage 5: Publishing

In this stage, students came to the next class after they finished writing the last form of their essay at home. They handed their essays to their instructor for sharing and assessment. Thus, the instructor played the role of the students' audience and assessor at the same time. She gave grades and wrote a general comment and other comments on the details of the essays, using correction symbols beside each mistake. Finally, the instructor allowed her students to receive their essays once again to have a look on her assessment and comments. The instructor took the essays back and kept them in files labelled with each student's name.

Teaching Method Used

According to the previously mentioned stages of the strategy, the instructor utilized discussion as a teaching method.

Teaching Materials

The present study used the following teaching materials:

1. The essay writing contract.
2. The board.
3. Microsoft PowerPoint.
4. Students' worksheets.

Assessment

The present study used both formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment was represented in the general comment, other detailed comments and the grades given to students -in the light of the contract grades- on their essay writing. Whereas, summative assessment was represented in the grades given to students on their performance in the English language pre-post essay writing test and in the pre-post attitudes scale towards English language writing.

According to the previously mentioned method of the study, the study procedures could be summarized in the following figures:

Figure 1

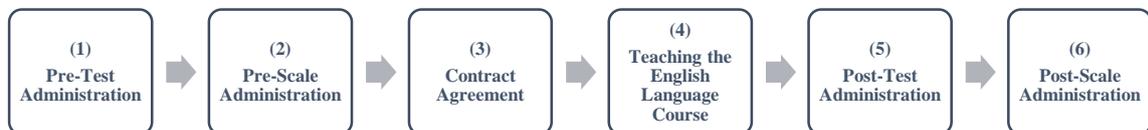**The Procedures of the Strategy Applied to the Experimental Group**

(1) Pre-Test Administration	(2) Pre-Scale Administration	(3) Contract Agreement	(4) Teaching the English Language Course	(5) Post-Test Administration	(6) Post-Scale Administration

Figure 2

The Procedures of the Strategy Applied to the Control Group

(1) Pre-Test Administration	(2) Pre-Scale Administration	(3) Teaching the English Language Course in the regular method	(4) Post-Test Administration	(5) Post-Scale Administration
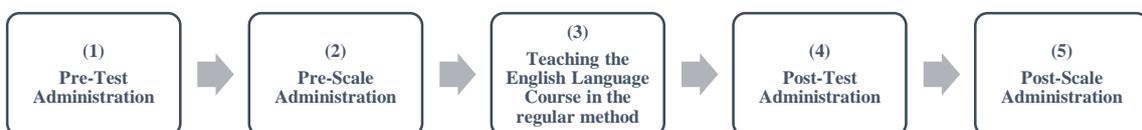
4. Data Analysis and Results

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of a contract learning-based strategy in developing English language essay writing and attitudes towards English language writing among pre-master degree in education students. Both the experimental and the control groups were submitted to pre and post administration of the essay writing test and the writing attitudes scale. The data analysis and the results were interpreted in the light of the study hypotheses. To test the first hypothesis: "There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students' performance on the pre-administration and post-administration of the English language essay writing test as a whole and in each writing component in favour of the post-administration of the test", a t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the experimental group students on the pre-administration versus the post-administration of the English language essay writing test. Paired sample t-test was used. Table 1 shows means, standard deviations and t-value of the experimental group on the pre and post administration of the English language essay writing test.

Table 1
T-test Results Comparing Mean Scores of the Pre and Post Administration of the Test on the Experimental Group
(N=100, DF=99)

Components	Administration	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t-value	Sign. Level	Effect Size (η^2)
1. Content	Pre	5.37	1.698	0.170	34.947	0.000	0.93
	Post	11.34	0.966	0.097			
2. Organization	Pre	3.65	1.395	0.140	24.776	0.000	0.86
	Post	8.08	1.468	0.147			
3. Vocabulary	Pre	4.03	1.540	0.154	27.311	0.000	0.88
	Post	8.42	1.156	0.116			
4. Structure	Pre	5.46	1.514	0.151	22.700	0.000	0.84
	Post	8.78	0.719	0.072			
5. Mechanics	Pre	4.24	0.866	0.087	18.205	0.000	0.77
	Post	5.78	0.613	0.061			
6. Total	Pre	22.75	3.922	0.392	49.649	0.000	0.96
	Post	42.40	2.586	0.259			

T-test proved that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre-administration versus the post-administration of the English language essay writing test in favour of the post-administration of the test. The effect sizes shown indicated that the implemented strategy had a significant effect on the experimental group post-performance on each assigned writing component score as well as the total score of all the components.

The largest effect size was for Content (0.90) with t-value (34.947), followed by Vocabulary (0.88) with t-value (27.311), then Organization (0.86) with t-value (24.776), followed by Structure (0.84) with t-value (22.700) and lastly Mechanics (0.77) with t-value (18.205). The effect size of the total score of all components was (0.96) with t-value (49.649). Thus, the effect size values displayed that the strategy used had a large effect on students' performance in each essay writing component as well as their total performance. As a results, the first hypothesis was supported. For more illustration of the previously mentioned results, figure (3) was presented:

Figure 3
Results of the Pre-Post Administration of the Test on the Experimental Group
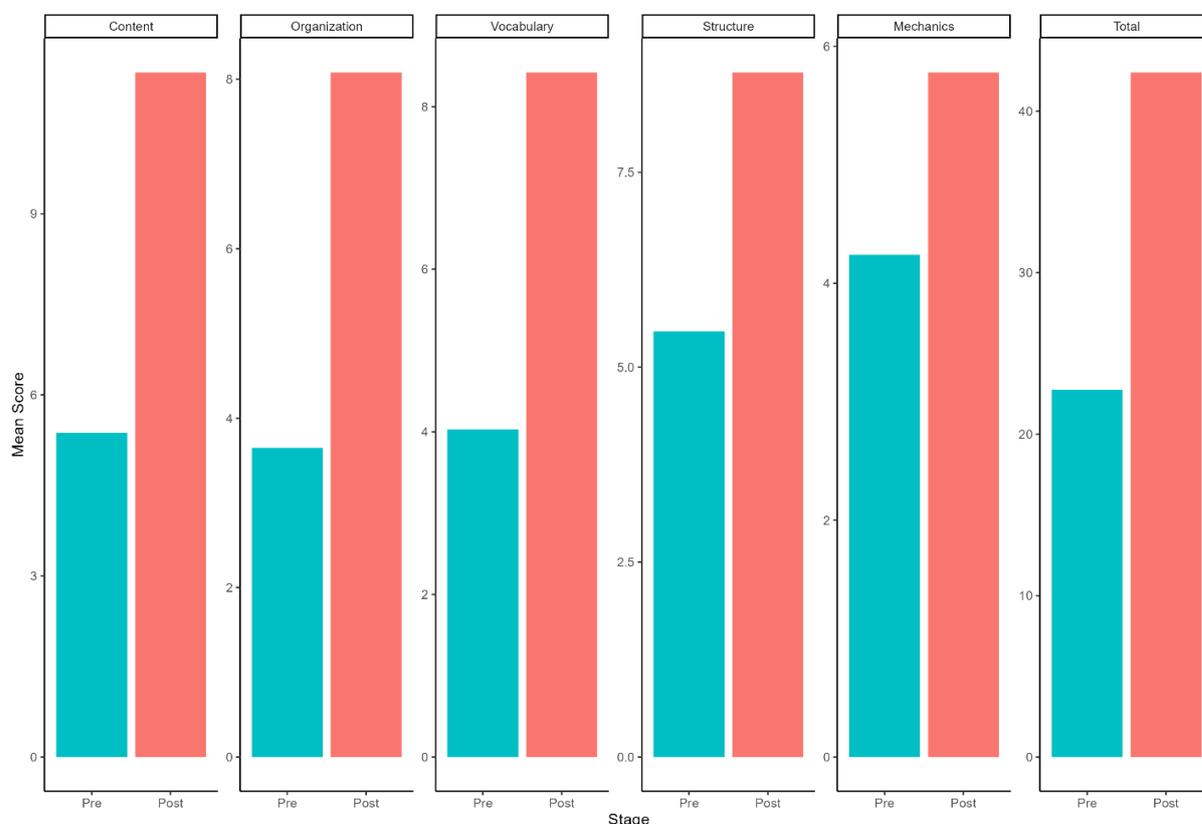
To test the second hypothesis: "There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of experimental group students' performance and control group students' performance on the post-administration of the English language essay writing test as a whole and in each writing component in favour of experimental group students' performance", a t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the post-administration of the experimental group versus the performance of the post-administration of the control group. Paired sample t-test was also used. Table (2) shows means, standard deviations and t-value of the experimental and the control groups on the post-administration of the English language essay writing test.

Table 2
T-test Results Comparing Mean Scores of the Post Administration of the Test on the Experimental and Control Groups
(N=200, DF=198)

Components	Administration	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t-value	Sign. Level	Effect Size (η^2)
1. Content	Experimental	11.34	100	0.966	0.097	26.289	0.000	0.78
	Control	6.26	100	1.673	0.167			
2. Organization	Experimental	8.08	100	1.468	0.147	17.370	0.000	0.60
	Control	4.66	100	1.312	0.131			
3. Vocabulary	Experimental	8.42	100	1.156	0.116	17.948	0.000	0.62
	Control	5.01	100	1.508	0.151			
4. Structure	Experimental	8.78	100	0.719	0.072	14.263	0.000	0.51
	Control	6.41	100	1.498	0.150			
5. Mechanics	Experimental	5.78	100	0.613	0.061	6.726	0.000	0.19
	Control	5.13	100	0.747	0.075			
6. Total	Experimental	42.40	100	2.586	0.259	32.947	0.000	0.85
	Control	27.47	100	3.721	0.372			

T-test proved that there was a statistical difference between the mean scores of the experimental group versus the control group on the post-administration of the English language essay writing test in favour of the experimental group. The effect sizes of the writing components indicated that the implemented strategy had an effect on the experimental group post-performance on each writing component score as well as the total score of all the components.

The largest effect size was for Content (0.78) with t-value (26.289), followed by Vocabulary (0.62) with t-value (17.948), followed by Organization (0.60)

with t-value (17.370), then Structure (0.51) with t-value (14.263) and finally Mechanics (0.19) with t-value (6.726). The total effect size was (0.85) with t-value (32.947).

Therefore, the effect size values showed that the implemented strategy had an effect on the experimental group performance. Consequently, the second hypothesis was confirmed. For more clarification of the previously mentioned results, figure (4) was presented:

Figure 4
Results of the Post Administration of the Test on the Experimental and Control Groups
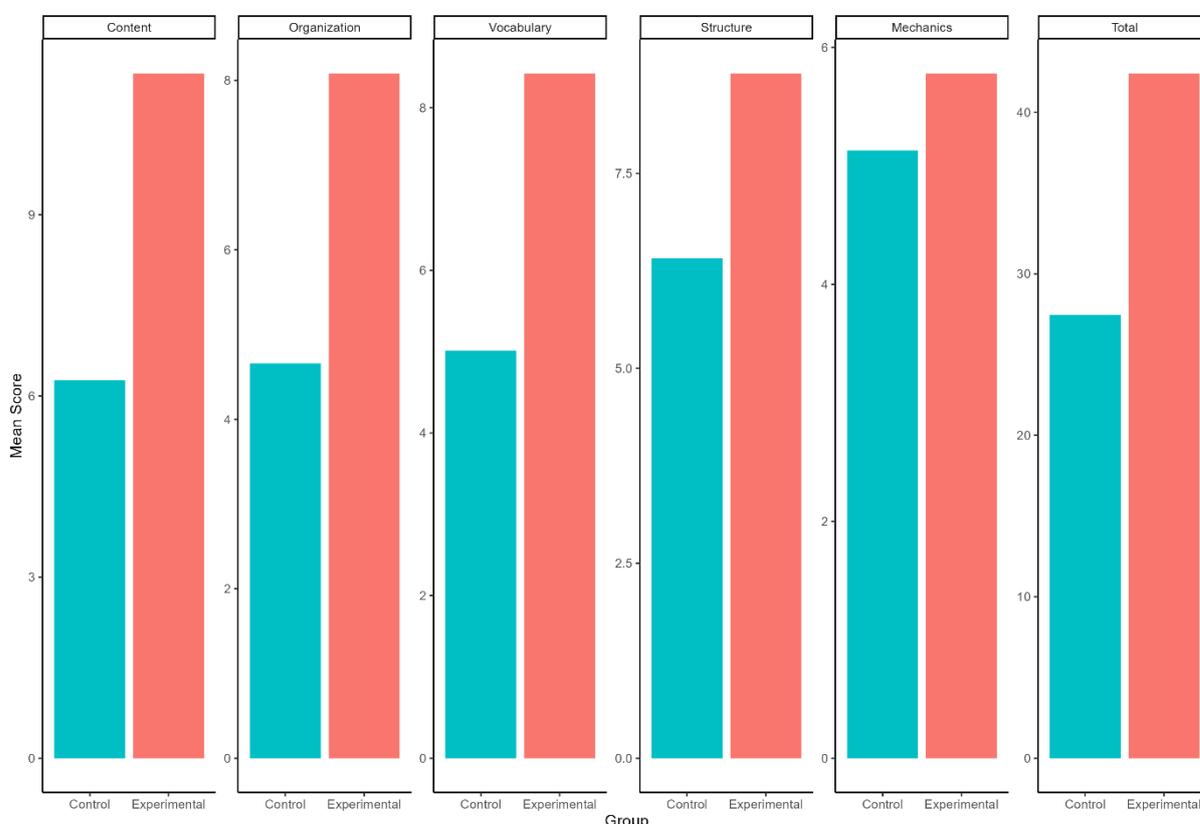
To test the third hypothesis: "There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students' performance on the pre-administration and post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing in favour of the post-administration of the scale", a t-test was conducted to compare the performance of the pre-administration of the experimental group versus its post-administration. Paired sample t-test was used. Table (3) shows means, standard deviations and t-value of the experimental group on the pre-administration and post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing.

Table 3
T-test Results Comparing Mean Scores of the Pre and Post Administration
of the Attitudes Scale on the Experimental Group
(N=100, DF=99)

Administration	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t-value	Sign. Level	Effect Size (η^2)
Pre	37.54	3.865	0.386	96.870	0.000	0.99
Post	87.19	3.375	0.337			

T-test proved that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pre-administration and post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing in favour of the post-administration of the scale.

The total effect size was (0.99), with t-value (96.870). Thus, the third hypothesis was corroborated. For more clarification of the pre-post attitudes scale towards English language writing of the experimental group, figure (5) was designed:

Figure 5
Results of the Pre and Post Administration of the Attitudes Scale
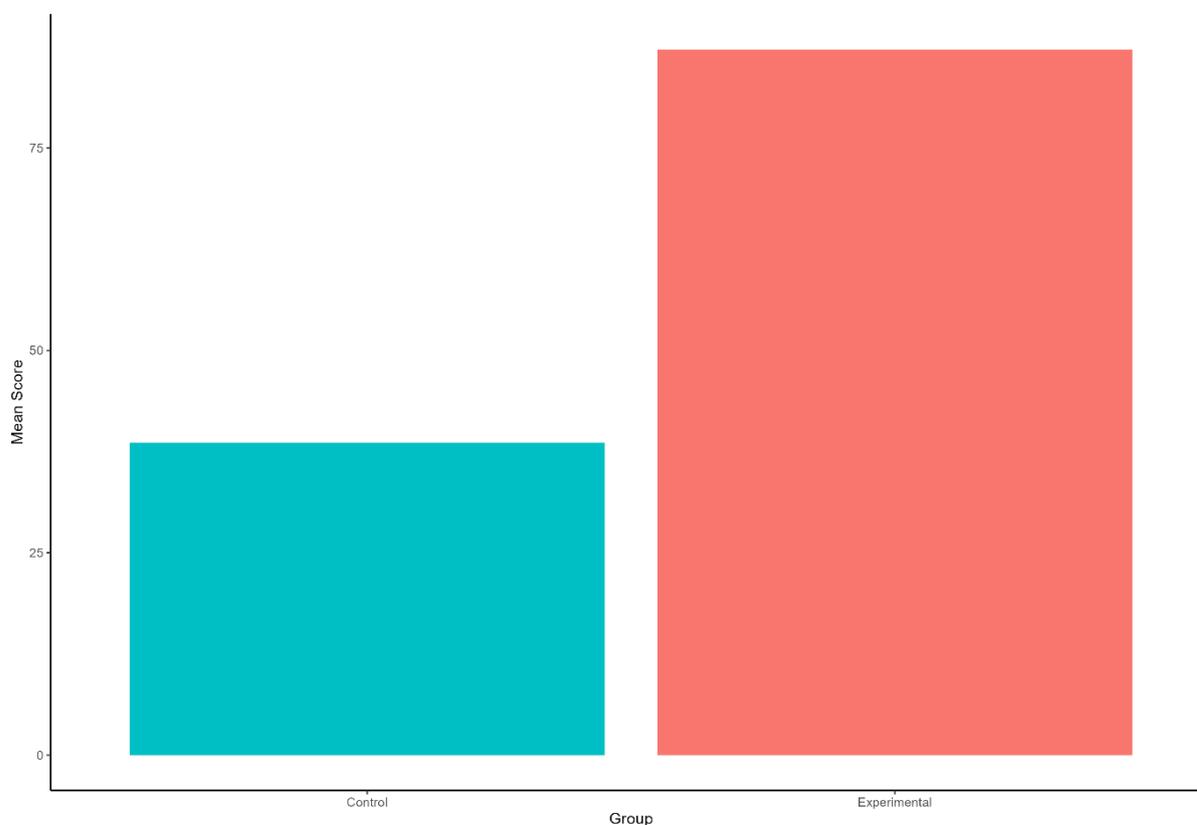**on the Experimental Group**
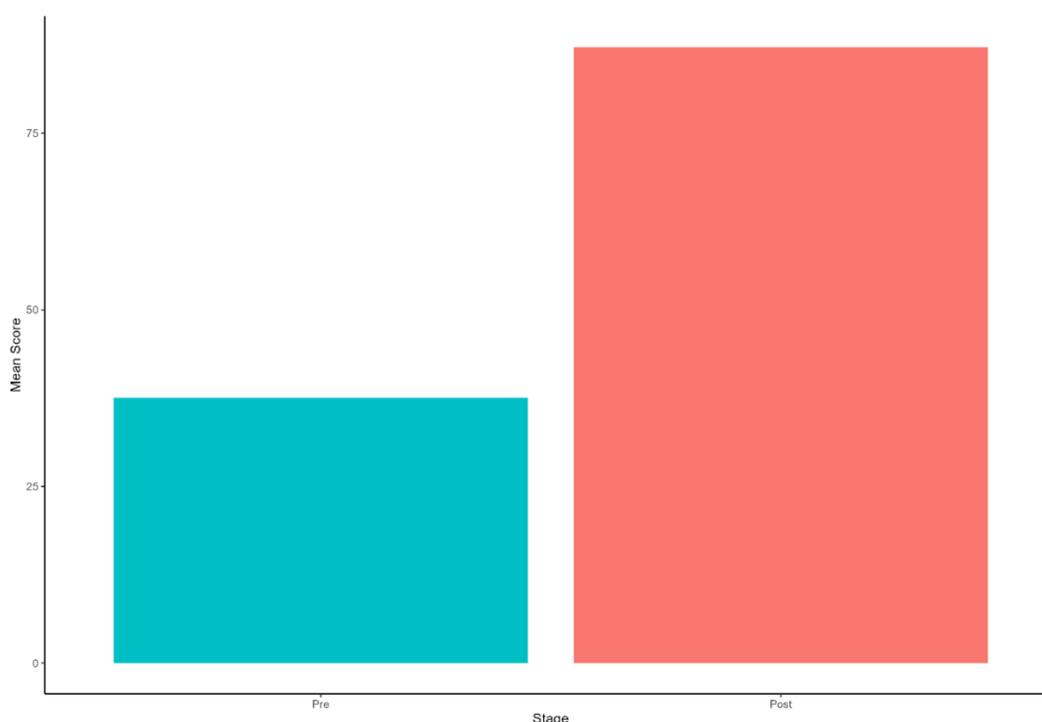
To test the fourth hypothesis: "There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students' performance and control group students' performance on the post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing in favour of experimental group students' performance", a t-test was conducted to compare the experimental group versus the control group on the attitudes scale towards English language writing. Paired sample t-test was used. Table (4) illustrates means, standard deviations and t-value of the experimental and the control groups on the post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing.

Table 4
T-test Results Comparing Mean Scores of the Post-Administration of the Attitudes Scale on the Experimental and Control Groups
(N=200, DF=198)

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t-value	Sign. Level	Effect Size (η^2)
Experimental	87.19	100	3.375	0.337	104.672	0.000	0.98
Control	38.60	100	3.188	0.319			

T-test proved that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups on the post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing in favour of the experimental group. The effect size indicated that the implemented strategy had a significant effect on the experimental group. The total effect size was (0.98), with t-value (104.672). Thus, the fourth hypothesis was verified. For more elaboration of the post-administration of the attitudes scale towards English language writing results, figure (6) was designed:

Figure 6
**Results of the Post-Administration of the Attitudes Scale on the Experimental and
Control Groups**

5. Discussion of Results

Results of the study proved that the experimental group's post-performance significantly exceeded its own pre-performance on each essay writing component and on the total essay writing test score. Results also proved that the attitudes of the experimental group towards English language writing on the post-administration of the attitudes scale significantly outperformed the pre-administration of the scale. Moreover, results of the study proved that the experimental group's post-performance exceeded the control group's post-performance on each essay writing component and on the total essay writing test score. They also proved that the experimental group's attitudes towards English language learning significantly outperformed the control group's performance on the post-administration of the attitudes scale.

These results are consistent with the results of other researchers as: Chan (2015), Zandi (2015), Litterio (2018), Ward (2021) and Ward (2021). Contract learning developed students' essay writing performance and encouraged the

readiness of the students for autonomous and self-directed learning. It also proved to have an obvious positive effect on students' attitudes towards English language writing. The majority of students -91% as the current study proved- could fulfil the contract's requirements. Furthermore, contract learning could significantly reduce the stress of threat of assessment, workload demands and improve grades of the experimental group. Thus, the implementation of the contract grading in assessing students helped in creating a healthy learning environment that could be challenging and motivating instead of being threatening.

However, the result of Litterio's study (2016) was inconsistent with the results of the current study. Although Litterio's study (2016) indicated that students reached an involvement in the grading process, they resisted participation in generating their assessment criteria as a class. They preferred using regular grading methods generated by their teacher. Students in the current study agreed to participate in creating their assessment criteria and reached a complete involvement in their grading process. This could be attributed to the coming-of-age, maturity and feeling of responsibility of the pre-master degree in education students about their own learning.

Concerning English language essay writing, the experimental group achieved evident progress on their post-performance grades in all the essay writing components, as well as the total performance grade; namely: Content, Vocabulary, Organization, Structure and Mechanics respectively than on their pre-performance grades. Concerning the attitudes scales towards English language writing, the experimental group also displayed significant increasement in the positive attitudes grade towards English language writing on their post-performance than their pre-performance total grade.

The experimental group also achieved progress on their post-performance grades in all the essay writing components, as well as the total performance grade; namely: Content, Vocabulary, Organization, Structure, and Mechanics respectively than the post-performance grades of the control group. Concerning the attitudes scale towards English language writing, the experimental group also displayed significant increasement in the positive attitudes grade towards English language writing on their post-performance than the control group's post-performance total grade.

Contract grading helped students to have clear expectations and good understanding of the requirements of English language essay writing, as well as more involvement in the assessment process than the conventional methods for assessment. By using contract grading, the assessment process supported students' efforts and attempts to meet the criteria agreed upon.

Through contract grading, participating students decided how they would be graded and set their own expectations and criteria. Contract grading actually implemented setting clear objectives for what Contract (A or B) they could accomplish, working towards them and being notified if they were on track. Moreover, contract grading allowed for more meaningful and effective feedback and more realistic and functional vision for assignments. By students' selection of their workload, and their full participation in all aspects of the contract grading process, there was less pressure on them and an inner feeling of satisfaction and self-autonomy throughout the implementation of the strategy. This was obvious through the results of the attitudes scale towards English language writing.

In general, being involved with their progress as good writers, students gained better knowledge of the technicalities of essay writing and how to deliver information effectively and successfully. Students could present information more accurately and clearly than before. In addition, they developed their English language essay writing components and skills in a way that they could utilize during the rest of their future studies, along with their future career. Contract grading removed the instructor as having the ultimate judgement, and invited students to take an active role in their writing learning and assessment process, and to reflect independently and metacognitively about their writing. Thus, while conventional assessment concealed the assessment criteria, totally or partially from the students, the contract system offered clear learning objectives which reduced stress and brought relief to the participants. Connecting the due dates of the assignments with the collaborative classwork and expectations in students' minds reduced the cognitive load of the tasks and students' feeling of the evaluative threat. All that increased the participants' sense of responsibility, control, confidence, achievement and self-autonomy.

Recommendations

In the light of the results of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

1. Contract learning should be utilized in teaching English language essay writing as it helps in developing students' writing, enhance their autonomous learning and develop their positive attitudes towards English language writing.
2. Contract learning should be incorporated into teachers' training programmes.
3. Contract learning should be viewed as a model for other types of contracts learners will experience in their personal life after finishing their studies.

Suggestions for Further Studies

In the light of the results of this study, the following issues were suggested for further studies:

1. More studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of contract learning in developing Listening, Speaking and Reading.
2. Further studies are needed to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of contract learning in developing essay writing of learners at the pre-tertiary level and at the college level as well.
3. Other studies are needed to measure the effectiveness of utilizing contract learning in developing learners' self-regulation, self-efficacy and motivation towards English language learning.

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Appendix (1)

The Grading Contract (A & B)

Component	You are guaranteed an A if:	You are guaranteed a B if:
Content	1. Your essay uses correct writing format that includes introduction, body and conclusion. 2. Main ideas are comprehensible. 3. Related topic sentence is written for each paragraph. 4. Suitable clarifying details are used. (20 grades)	1. Your essay uses correct writing format that includes introduction, body and conclusion. 2. Most main ideas are comprehensible. 3. In most cases, related topic sentence is written for each paragraph. 4. Most clarifying details used are suitable. (20 grades)
Organization	5. Ideas are arranged logically. 6. Transitions are used appropriately. 7. Essay paragraphs are written coherently. (15 grades)	5. Most ideas are arranged logically. 6. Most transitions are used appropriately. 7. Essay paragraphs are written coherently. (15 grades)
Vocabulary	8. Word spelling is written correctly. 9. Words are chosen appropriately. 10. Writing unnecessarily repeated words is avoided. (15 grades)	8. Most word spelling is written correctly. 9. Most words are chosen appropriately. 10. In most cases, writing unnecessarily repeated words is avoided. (15 grades)
Structure	11. Proper sentence structure is used. 12. Sentences are complete. 13. Accurate tenses are used. (15 grades)	11. Most sentence structure is written properly. 12. Most sentences are complete. 13. Most tenses are used accurately. (15 grades)
Mechanics	14. Capitalization rules are used correctly. 15. Punctuation rules are applied appropriately. (10 grades)	14. Most capitalization rules are used correctly. 15. Most punctuation rules are applied appropriately. (10 grades)
Time	16. Essay is presented on time. (5 grades)	16. In most cases, the essay is presented on time. (5 grades)
Total	Total Grade = 80 (each item in the contract is assessed by 5 grades). High (A$^+$) = 75, Medium (A) = 70, Low (A$^-$) = 65	Total Grade = 80 (each item in the contract is assessed by 5 grades). High (B$^+$) = 60, Medium (B) = 55, Low (B$^-$) = 50

Appendix (2)

The English Language Essay Writing Test

Name: ………………………….

Group: ………………………….

Specialization: ………………….

Time: 45 minutes.

Total Grade: 75.

Dear Student:

- **Write an essay of about 150-200 words defining an educational problem in the Egyptian context, and how you -as a researcher- can contribute to solving this problem.**

- **N.B.: The essay should include: a title and three essential paragraphs: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.**

Best Wishes.

Appendix (3)

The Attitudes Scale Towards English Language Writing

Name: ………………………….   Time: 30 minutes.

Group: …………………………   Total Grade: …….

Specialization: ………………….

Dear Student:

Read the following items thoroughly. Put a tick (✓) under the most suitable answer from the choices: strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, strongly disagree.

Thank you for your co-operation.

No.	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I like writing essays in English language.					
2	I feel stressed when I write an essay using English language.					
3	I discovered that essay writing is an unpleasant experience.					
4	Essay writing scares me.					
5	I believe that I usually have enough time to complete writing an essay.					
6	I favour having more time than permitted to revise my essay after writing.					
7	While writing an essay, it is difficult to be motivated all the time.					
8	I feel that my essay writing is improving all the time.					
9	I am quite aware of the different writing styles and formats.					
10	I incline to write clear content.					
11	While writing, I do not pay much attention to the organization of my essay.					
12	I feel that I do not have a full mastery of vocabulary in my writing.					
13	I tend to use various sentence patterns in writing.					
14	I am not always sure of the accuracy of my writing mechanics.					
15	When I write quickly, I feel uninterested of making spelling mistakes.					
16	Writing essays in English language does not waste my time.					
17	When I understand the writing instructions, I feel capable of achieving the requirements.					
18	When I finish writing an essay, I feel disappointed with my final work.					
19	Throughout the process of a writing test, I feel confident that I will succeed.					
20	I have an inner feeling that my essays leave a positive impression about my writing skills on the readers.					