

The Effect of Post -Task Activity on EFL Learners' Writing Fluency, Writing Complexity and Grammatical Accuracy

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of post-task activity on EFL learners' writing fluency, writing complexity and grammatical accuracy among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To fulfill this purpose, 60 female EFL students between 18 to 25 years old at Iran Language Institute in Tehran, Iran, were conveniently sampled and then were assigned into two groups: one experimental and one control, 30 people each. Before instruction, the experimental and control groups were pre-tested, then the experimental group received task-based instruction in which special attention was paid to post-task phase. In the control group, however, such emphasis was not laid on post-task phase. After a treatment period of six weeks, a posttest was given to the participants. In order to find out the difference between the mean scores as far as accuracy, complexity and fluency of the two groups were concerned, Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was run. The results indicated that there was a significant effect of post-task activity on the experimental group's writing performance in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency as compared to the control group ($p < .05$). The results of the study can have significant implications for EFL teachers, learners, researchers, and syllabus designers.

Keywords: post-task activity, writing complexity, writing fluency, grammatical accuracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers and teachers who were dissatisfied by teacher-oriented, form-based language teaching method, developed the theory of Task Based Instruction (TBI) in the 1980s (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). The assumption that basic language learning processes take place in holistic rather than analytic language activities is the explanation behind TBI, and for this learning process to happen, tasks are priceless (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Tasks should be the basic unit for both constructing a language program and individual lessons because they produce opportunities for communication and observing relationships between form, meaning and function, which are the vital conditions for developing communicative proficiency in a second language (SL) (Willis & Willis, 2007). Doughty and Pica (1986) summarized the findings of the latest research on determining the effects of task type and participation patterns on language classroom interaction. They found out that group and dyad interaction patterns produced more modification than did the teacher-

fronted situation, which suggested that the participation pattern as well as the task type have an effect on the conversational modifications in interaction.

The case of Post-Task activities is also appealing. An example of this type of activities is that learners are notified before they do a task that some of them will be asked to do the task one more time in front of the entire class. The theory explaining it is that while students are doing a task, knowing that they will do it again, will motivate them to focus on avoiding errors, because when more pedagogic patterns dominate, they will more clearly observe the connection between the task and their later performance. In their study (1997), Skehan and Foster predicted that a post-task condition selectively contributes to accuracy. Through two studies, Skehan and Foster (1997) could indicate the effect of a post-task upon writing accuracy, but this held true only for interactive tasks. A higher level of accuracy was reported for exchange of personal information and narrative tasks, but this finding was not of statistical significance. A significant practice effect was also reported for accuracy: after 2 to 3 weeks of the study, the impact on accuracy grew in strength.

Writing as a skill involves a number of complex rhetorical and linguistic operations which must be taught. Thus, for effective writing, the writer has to use a large number of formal features in order to help his/her readers infer the intended meaning. Failure to use these features correctly causes vagueness, ellipsis and ambiguity in some writings learning to write is uniquely challenging. Writing requires the mastery and concurrent use of a complex array of language skills, from vocabulary and spelling to the ability to organize and convey ideas. Indeed, the intricacies of writing make it one of the highest forms of human expression. This study wants to investigate whether post-task tasks can improve learner's writing performance or not.

A. Statement of the problem

Writing is one of the language skills used by people to convey their messages. It is also used to express ideas, feelings, thoughts, and so on. In writing, a writer needs the words and organizational structures that make the words convey the writers' ideas or messages through development and coherence (Nasution, 2008). Moreover, writing should be organized effectively and should include some aspects like word choice, grammar, mechanics, and content or evidence. It means that writing should communicate something clearly, precisely, and unambiguously so that the readers can comprehend the writer of what is being written about (Nasution, 2008). However, among the four skills, writing is the most difficult for foreign language (FL) learners to learn as it requires paying attention to both higher and lower level skills at the same time during the writing process (Bae & Bachman, 2010). Some criteria of acceptability in different aspects of writing including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, spelling, punctuation and accuracy are essential for writing task and these criteria make the writing task a difficult one (Hamadouche, 2010).

Grammatical accuracy, in writing, is required to ensure the writer's intended message and to avoid communicative misunderstanding (Lush, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Teaching EFL writing accuracy is a difficult task for many teachers due to the fact that

correcting students' compositions is time –consuming. Moreover, teaching writing implicitly incorporates teaching grammar and one should dominate the grammar rules in order to write well. Many of the student's writings are poorly organized and grammatically awkward in spite of teacher's hard work. Their writings may be insufficiently developed and students may poorly use vocabulary and avoid sentence variety in their writing structures. There are several reasons for this problem including lack of self-sufficiency, lack of involvement in their own leaning and also lack of motivation. In effect, if the students do not have any motivation or desire to learn a foreign language they will not devote their time and efforts to learning a foreign language. However, when students are duly motivated, they will become involved in learning a foreign language and will learn it autonomously (Wang, 2004). Teachers can prompt students to write by various approaches and methods like Task-based instruction in the classroom (Nasution, 2008).

As stated before, the research problem can be identified in the students' poor mastery of the necessary EFL writing skills that need to be developed. This might be attributed to the traditional methods of teaching adopted by most EFL classroom teachers. In such settings, such as the case of EFL Iranian classes, the role of post-task activities which provide opportunities for repeating and following up on the task performance is neglected in writing instruction most of the time (Davoudi et al, 2013). Thus, shedding more light on the effectiveness of Post-task activities on EFL learners' writing development in Iranian EFL classrooms context seems to be essential in developing students' writing performance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In one study, Rezazadeh et al. (2011) examined the role of task type in foreign language written production (focusing on fluency, complexity, and accuracy). This study was aimed to investigate the impacts of two types of tasks on foreign language written performance. In particular, the research studied the difference of three dimensions of language production (i.e. fluency, complexity, and accuracy) for two different task types (i.e. argumentative writing task and instruction writing task). To have two task type groups, one hundred sixty eight intermediate English learners were randomly sampled and divided. The findings showed that regarding fluency and accuracy, participants in the instruction-task group had a significantly better performance than those in argumentative-task group. Furthermore, analyzing complexity measures revealed a more complex language for argumentative essays than the instruction essays.

Regarding task type, Duff (1986) studied eight pairs of non-native speakers. This study's focus was both on quantity and quality of interaction in two tasks. For one task participants solved a problem together; for the other one, they were assigned with different ideas on a subject which they had to discuss. To evaluate the quantity of their language performance, c-units -defined as "a word, phrase, or sentence that in some way contributed pragmatic or semantic meaning to a conversation"- were used; the number of turns, types of questions and syntactic complexity were used to assess the quality. Findings suggested that more turns (per individual and for the whole task), and more c-units (per task) were produced

in the problem-solving task. The discussion task led to more words per turn, more words per c-unit, and more syntactic complexity.

Bygate (1999) addressed two different tasks' impact on grammatical complexity; two argumentation tasks and two narrative tasks were applied. For the argumentative task, participants were required to prioritize a list of options and for the narrative task, they were asked to narrate a story using some pictures. Length of T-unit, subordination, number of verb arguments, and type of subordination were used as measures of evaluating complexity. According to the findings, the narrative task had more words per T-unit, but regarding using subordination no significant difference was observed. According to the findings, the language produced in argumentation task contained more 'verbal', while the narrative task contained more 'nominal' output. This study's results further confirmed the unexpected differences (often) in learner speech on various tasks.

Marashi and Didari (2012) studied the influence of task-based writing on EFL learners' writing performance and creativity. They found out that learners gained advantages from task-based writing regarding writing and creativity. According to their results, it is very necessary for writing teachers to apply various kinds of tasks, offer opportunities by increasing amount of input, actively involve them in the class procedures, and encourage them to be more creative in their writing and write their first draft freely without any concern for formal linguistic features. Rezaei(2014) in his article titled as "Writing in Task-based Class for EFL Learners" found out that teaching writing by using TBLT can enhance the student's ability. According to their results, in order to enhance the writing ability, TBLT is useful for students. TBLT offers the students' material which they have to actively engage in the process of teaching-learning in order to achieve a goal or complete a task. It can enhance the student's ability in representing ideas, encourage the students to write, and make the class situation more alive.

Pourdana and Karimi (2011) in their article titled as "Task Types in EFL Context: Accuracy, Fluency, and Complexity in Assessing Writing Performance" evaluated the influence of three types of language assessment tasks, known as Topic Writing, Picture Description, and Text Reconstruction, on dimensions of accuracy, fluency and complexity in Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. According to their results from Analysis of Variances (ANOVA), there is a high extent of accuracy and complexity in EFL learners' performance on Topic Writing task, comparing to aspect of fluency which was demonstrated to be the highest in EFL learners' performance on Picture Description task.

Khodabakhshizadeh and Mousavi (2012) investigated the effect of post-task activities on the TEFL students' fluency and accuracy in oral production. According to their results, various types of repeated performance (i.e., public and private) as post-task activities effect on fluency and accuracy of oral production. They confirmed R. Ellis's (1994) argument that different types of activities can enhance learning. The participants were all TEFL students studying at Iranian universities and institutes. They were categorized into four groups. They all engaged in pre and post interview sessions. The students in group A individually repeated their performance. The students in group B replicated their performance in front of the class and the students in group C as the last experimental group replicated their performance both

in public and private. The students in group D as the control group didn't replicated performance. The results demonstrated that group B's performance is the best in fluency. The students in group C, concerning accuracy, did their best.

Zohrabi and Abasvand(2014) studied the influence of task repetition on increasing Iranian EFL learners' accuracy and complexity in writing proficiency. The results of an immediate post-test demonstrated that task repetition positively influenced the accuracy and complexity of the participants' writings in the experimental group. Also, task repetition had a long-term influence one month after the treatment ended.

Seifollahi and Hadidi (2012), concerned with task planning, studied the influence of planning conditions on Iranian EFL learners' written task performance regarding fluency and complexity. They found out that pre task planning led to greater fluency. Unpressured on-line planning (OLP) influenced significantly neither on syntactic complexity nor on written fluency, and the opportunity to engage the learners simultaneously in pre-task and no-line planning (POLP) increased the fluency and complexity of their written performance significantly.

AshariTabar and Alavi (2013) studied the influences of task-based writing under different pre-task planning contexts on intermediate EFL learners' written performance in personal and decision-making tasks. Their findings demonstrated that the pre-task planning was an effective writing strategy and cooperative planning, particularly, was very prominent in increasing EFL learners' general writing ability when completing personal and decision-making tasks. Rahimpour and Safari (2011) studied the influences of pre-task planning (PTP) and on-line planning (OLP) on descriptive writing of EFL learners. According to their results, planning time didn't influence the complexity and accuracy of participants' performance but it had affected positively the fluency of PTP group. Ghavamnia et al. (2013) studied the influence of pre-task and online planning conditions on the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of EFL learners' written production. They suggested that the pre-task planning group generated the complex and fluent writings, while the online planning group generated more error free clauses representing a more accurate writing performance.

Cheng (2011) investigated the influence of Post-task Activity on EFL writing performance. He studied how the revision of learner's written texts made by the teacher enhances the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of his/her writing. The participants of his study include one hundred and fifty freshmen from a university in Taiwan. A total of six written text were done with successfully in a semester. The instructor collected and revised such written text. One of the six prompts was chosen as the posttest at the end of the semester. The second writing was scored and compared with the first one on the basis of accuracy, fluency and complexity. Cheng (2011) found out that that students in Group A and B applied the most suitable vocabulary, natural expressions and more complex sentence structures in the posttest and committed fewer errors. However, Group C, in comparison to group A and B had the worst performance. No students in Group C applied the specific vocabulary or expressions in the second writing. Clearly, teacher's revision didn't significantly contribute to the writing of Group C. This study was done in order to examine the participants' perceptions of the post-task requirement. The findings of this study

demonstrated that although instruction is a good method to provide input, the modification of written passage if used appropriately can be sources of alternative input to enhance writing outcome.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

Sixty EFL students in two intact classes were conveniently sampled from among 120 intermediate, female EFL learners aged from 18 to 25 at Iran Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. The homogeneity of the participants was assured as they had been placed in that level through administration of Preliminary English Test (PET) developed by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. These 60 students were randomly assigned into two classes: one experimental group and one control group.

B. Instruments

In order to collect data, two tests were used: **A Pre-test:** This included the writing section (part three) of a Preliminary English test (PET) administered prior to the actual phase of the study to take up the initial differences between the groups. This test asked participants to write an informal letter in reply to one receive from an English friend in 10 minutes. The reliability of the test had been ensured in a pilot study with ten of the participants and had been found to be 0.85. This test was administered to both control and experimental groups before the treatment and the accuracy, fluency and complexity of students' writing were measured.

A Post-test: This included the writing section (part three) of a Preliminary English test (PET) administered after the actual phase of the study to take up the differences between the groups in terms of writing Fluency, Complexity and accuracy. The reliability of this test had been measured in a pilot study with ten of the participants and had been found to be 0.91.

C. Procedure

The treatment phase took about 6 weeks during which the participants attended 10 one-and-a-half-hour sessions twice a week. Because of time limitations and the extensive syllabus, 30 minutes of each of these 10 sessions were allocated to the treatment. Before instruction, the experimental and control group were pre-tested in the classroom. Both groups had to write and answer part three of writing section of the PET. Here the participants were asked to answer a letter sent to them by English friend who asked for *I want to find out about music in your country. Are there many live concerts? What music do you like listening to?* in 10 minutes.

Then the treatment began by asking the experimental group to write on some assigned topics during the treatment period following a task-based approach in which special attention was paid to post-task phase. In the pre-task and while-task phases, the students were asked to organize their ideas and write about the presented task. They worked in groups and the

instructor walked around monitoring and helping students to formulate what they wanted to write. Sometimes, the teacher selected forms that the students used incorrectly while performing the task or useful forms that they failed to use at all. They were asked to read and discuss with their group members, then were asked to write a draft. The written drafts were checked by the teacher and were returned to the participants at the beginning of the next session with notes on conspicuous errors that students had made. In the post-task phase, the teacher addressed these errors to the whole class. A sentence reflecting the error would be written on the board, students would be invited to correct it, the corrected version would be written up, and a brief explanation was provided. Then participants were asked to revise all these and hand in the final draft the following class session.

The control group also received task-based instruction too. The teacher followed the same procedure described above in the control group too with the difference that here the participants were not asked to revise the teacher's corrected draft and to hand in a final draft after editing their products as part of a post-task phase.

At the end of the ten sessions of such treatment, the participants of the two groups were given a posttest including part three of PET in which they were required to write an informal letter to a pen friend who had asked them about , *tell me about the last film you saw and whether you enjoyed it.*"

D. Design

The study reported here is a quasi-experimental study with a pretest, posttest, and control group design, which can be schematically displayed as follows:

G. EXP T1... X... T2 G. CONT T1..... T2

E. Data Analysis

In order to find out the differences between the mean scores as far as accuracy, complexity and fluency of the two groups were concerned, a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was run. It started with testing normality assumptions such as Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality of test scores, homogeneity of regression slopes, homogeneity of regression lines, and Leven's test of Equality of Error Variances. After checking the normality assumptions, and making sure we could use parametric measures, we turned to testing the research hypotheses. To that end, the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run to check whether involving the participants in post-task activities could have had any significant effects on the EFL learners' writing performance as far as grammatical accuracy; grammatical complexity and writing fluency were concerned. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 1: Multivariate Analysis of Covariance: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Post.Accuracy	57.897 ^a	4	14.474	2.601	.046	.159
	Post.Complexity	5.334 ^b	4	1.333	5.774	.001	.296
	Post.Fluency	256.306 ^c	4	64.077	10.350	.000	.429
Intercept	Post.Accuracy	11.906	1	11.906	2.140	.149	.037
	Post.Complexity	.271	1	.271	1.175	.283	.021
	Post.Fluency	51.802	1	51.802	8.367	.005	.132
Pre.Accuracy	Post.Accuracy	14.873	1	14.873	2.673	.108	.046
	Post.Complexity	.236	1	.236	1.023	.316	.018
	Post.Fluency	37.626	1	37.626	6.077	.017	.100
Pre.Fluency	Post.Accuracy	29.038	1	29.038	5.219	.026	.087
	Post.Complexity	2.136	1	2.136	9.247	.004	.144
	Post.Fluency	3.939	1	3.939	.636	.429	.011
Pre.Complexity	Post.Accuracy	3.306	1	3.306	.594	.444	.011
	Post.Complexity	.014	1	.014	.062	.804	.001
	Post.Fluency	85.810	1	85.810	13.860	.000	.201
Groups	Post.Accuracy	25.447	1	25.447	4.573	.037	.077
	Post.Complexity	2.313	1	2.313	10.014	.003	.154
	Post.Fluency	76.399	1	76.399	12.340	.001	.183
Error	Post.Accuracy	306.037	55	5.564			
	Post.Complexity	12.702	55	.231			
	Post.Fluency	340.510	55	6.191			
Total	Post.Accuracy	2548.000	60				
	Post.Complexity	129.229	60				
	Post.Fluency	8511.130	60				
Corrected Total	Post.Accuracy	363.933	59				
	Post.Complexity	18.036	59				
	Post.Fluency	596.816	59				

a. R Squared =.159 (Adjusted R Squared =.098)

b. R Squared =.296 (Adjusted R Squared =.245)

c. R Squared =.429 (Adjusted R Squared =.388)

Although the F-values obtained indicated significant differences between the mean scores of the groups on the posttest scores of accuracy, complexity and fluency, after removing the possible effect of the pretest, the post-hoc comparison tests were run to

compare the groups in each of the variables and to answer the research questions raised at the outset of the study.

Table 2: Pairwise Comparisons

Dependent Variable	(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^a	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^a	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Post.Accuracy	Experimental	Control	-1.325*	.619	.037	-2.566	-.083
	Control	Experimental	1.325*	.619	.037	.083	2.566
Post.Complexity	Experimental	Control	.399*	.126	.003	.146	.652
	Control	Experimental	-.399*	.126	.003	-.652	-.146
Post.Fluency	Experimental	Control	2.295*	.653	.001	.986	3.604
	Control	Experimental	-2.295*	.653	.001	-3.604	-.986

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

- a. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

Based on the results displayed in Tables 1 and 2, it can be concluded that:

- A. There was a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group (M = 5.37) and control group (M = 6.69) (MD = -1.32, P <.05) implying that involving subjects in post-task activities can have significant effects on their grammatical accuracy.
- B. There was a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group (M = 1.56) and control group (M = 1.16) (MD = .399, P <.05) implying that involving subjects in post-task activities can have significant effects on their grammatical complexity.
- C. There was a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group (M = 12.63) and control group (M = 10.33) (MD = 2.29, P <.05) implying that involving subjects in post-task activities can have significant effects on their writing fluency.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study inspected the effect of post-task activity on EFL learners' writing fluency, complexity and accuracy. As the results of the data analyses shown, involving subjects in post-task activities can have significant effects on their grammatical complexity, accuracy and writing fluency.

The results of the present study are in line with a study done by Cheng (2009) who investigated participant's perceptions of the post-task requirement, in which revision of learners' written texts made by the teacher improved the accuracy, fluency, and complexity

of their writings. It can be said that, with task-based approach, learners are given the opportunity to practice and prepare all those activities needed for productive language (written text) use by attention to the meaning.

Furthermore, the results obtained in this study are backed up by a study carried out by Khodabakhshizadeh and Mousavi (2012) who studied the effect of post-task activities on the TEFL students' fluency and accuracy in oral production. According to their results, various types of repeated performance (i.e., public and private) as post-task activities effect on fluency and accuracy of oral production. The results of this study support the role of post-task activity on learners' performance.

As mentioned earlier, post-task activity is directed towards a focus on form (Skehan, 1996). It means that applying different methods on balancing these three goals of language (accuracy, complexity and fluency) leads to learning improvement. Here the role of teacher becomes very important. Teachers should be responsible to consider both learners' weakness and strengths. The teacher should try to find instruction for teaching writing in post-task phase to switch attention between these goals and to ensure that one does not improve at the expense of the other (Skehan, 1996).

According to Rezazadeh et al.(2011), teachers should instruct learners to plan the language of their essays in order to promote writing fluency. Teachers should also provide learners with the vocabulary they may need for their writings. To promote complexity for low demanding tasks, teachers should instruct L2/FL learners to how plan only the content of their essays. To promote complexity for high demanding tasks, teachers should instruct L2/FL learners how to plan both the content and language. Regarding accuracy, teachers should remind learners to direct some of their attention toward monitoring the grammatical accuracy. Additionally, teachers should provide learners with information about the grammatical structures that are relevant to the assigned tasks to help learners apply the grammatical structures accurately.

V. CONCLUSION

The current study revealed that post-task activities were significantly effective in EFL learner's writing performance. Regarding the effects of post-task activities on EFL learners' written production in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity, the findings of the study and the results of data analysis revealed that post-task activities had a positive effect on the participants' written fluency, complexity and grammatical accuracy in experimental group. The findings of this study indicated that participants in experimental group produced more accurate and complex language than participants who performed task without post-task activity.

As Skehan(1996) mentioned that "these activities all have the goal of focusing attention more clearly on language itself, so that when subsequent tasks are done, the knowledge of what is to come, and the connection that has been made with such activities in the past, will alert learners to need to attend to form during tasks"(P, 20). So post task activity provides conditions for learners to allocate attention between goals of fluency, accuracy and

complexity, and therefore, to make a balance between these performance areas. In other words, learners have to be encouraged to reflect the language which has been used for relating to these goals that are desirable. In order to achieve the attentional focus of learners that they can balance the three goals of accuracy, complexity and fluency, teachers should make a situation in which learners simultaneously alert to language-as-form and language-as-meaning. In using task-based instruction, it is necessary to design the materials in which attention is directed to form, function and meaning (Skehan, 1996).

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