The Effects of Types of Tasks on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Accuracy at Elementary Level

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Abstract

This experimental study evaluated the possible effects of task-based enhancement on the acquisition of writing accuracy on Iranian elementary EFL learners. How to write accurately besides how to control the needed and information within the required grammatical structures have been a real difficulty and problem for language learners. Thirty Iranian EFL learners at the elementary level of proficiency were randomly assigned into two groups: experimental group and control group. In the study, initial homogeneity of the groups was verified using a general proficiency test (KET, with some information-gap tasks). The results from Descriptive Statistics, One-Sample K-S T-Test, ANCOVA analysis of the written data revealed significant effects in performing task types. The findings have important pedagogical implication for EFL learners to understand the relationship between grammar task and L2 written skill.

Key words: Grammar tasks, EFL writing ability, experimental and control group, proficiency test (KET)

Introduction

In recent years, it is a well-established fact that language is not just a set of vocabularies to be learned and memorized. Language is a dynamic phenomenon and a process to create meaning and gets intended message across. Now there has been a change toward teaching language by doing it and cognitively engaging learners in some activities they are performing. Increasing number of teachers, in all subjects, have been looking for ways to change the traditional form of instruction in which knowledge is transmitted, in a one-way process, from a dominant teacher to a class of silent, obedient, passive learners. Underlying all of these approaches is a desire to involve students in some kinds of purposeful interaction with information, object, and/or ideas, often in groups, in order to develop their skills and knowledge. Because learners need to gain a deeper sense of understanding and have interaction in a situation by performing real-life like

activities need to use another method to create such opportunities for learners. Therefore, this results in developing of Task-based language teaching (TBLT). According to Nunan (1999), there is a view which differentiates between knowing what and 'knowing'; i.e., between knowing sets of rules or lists of vocabularies and being able to use them effectively, appropriately and communicatively. [Having the language usage and being able to use it.]

This theory offers a much more comprehensive view than Chomsky's (1959) view of competence, which deals primarily with abstract grammatical knowledge. When it comes to the learning any language, the proponents of task-based language teaching view second language learning as acquiring the linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions.

At the level of language theory, TBLT has a rich and theoretical base. Task-based learning can be regarded as one particular approach to implementing the broader "Communicative approach" and, as with the communicative approach in general, one of the features of task-based learning that often worries teachers is that it seems to have no place for the teaching of grammar. Here the task will be discussed from different scholars' points of view (cited in Ellis, 2003):

For Prabhu (1987), a task is "an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process."

According to Crookes (1986), a task is "a piece of work or an activity, usually with specified objective, undertaken as part of an education course, at work, or used to elicit data for research."

For Nunan (1989), a communicative task is "s piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather from. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.

Specially, in an Asian EFL environment where learners are limited in their accessibility to use the target language on a daily basis, it is first necessary for language learners to be provided with real opportunities to be exposed to language use in the classroom. It suggests that TBLT as an instructional method is more than just giving tasks to learners and evaluating their performance. A teacher, who wants to try implementing TBLT successfully, is required to have sufficient knowledge about the instructional framework related to its plan, procedure, and assessment.

According to Prabhu (1987), there are three main categories of task which he himself calls activity types: 1) Information-gap, 2) Reasoning-gap, 3)Opinion-gap, which we will lead with them in this research.

1) Informational-gap activity: There are tasks in which one group has a set of information, whereas another group has a complementary set. These groups discuss and negotiate in order to know each other's information and complete the task. This involves a transfer of given information from one person to another or from one place to another place just for the purpose of encoding of information.

2) Reasoning-gap activity: This involves the derivation of new information through the processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning or perception of relationship. This differs from the first one in what it involves the reasoning which connects two sets of information.

3) Opinion-gap activity: This involves identifying and articulation a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to given situation.

Although there are a lot of task-based activities, used in classes and affect the students' writing skill, it is often difficult and challenging to choose and apply effective and interesting activities to help learners promote and improve their writing skill (without grammatical mistake). The most important problem that learners face is their weakness in writing skill. As it is clear the classroom orientation can be different based on the methodology adapted in each classroom. Here, the two contrasting sets of classroom processes are going to be stated.

The first one is a traditional form-focused pedagogy, where language is treated as an object and the students are required to act as "learners".

The second one is a task-based pedagogy, where language is treated as a tool for communicating and the teacher and the students function primarily as "language teacher." This study has attempted to investigate the effects of grammar tasks on the Iranian EFL learner's writing accuracy.

The aim of all educational system is improving learning methods. Recently there is a wrong belief that learning occurs in absolute silent and sedentary classrooms. Therefore, the learners are

participants that are more passive. All interactions are actually monologues. However, nowadays theories are changing. Teachers tend to give roles that are more active to the learners.

The interactions changed to be dialogues. Group activities are encouraged. Although Iranian students begin to learn English from the guidance school, and although especially in recent years, the theories and syllabuses tentatively have been changed in order to improve the learning proficiency, it seems that all endeavors are performed in vain. The question and the problem which the research is concerning is that what are the reasons of the weakness of EFL learners in writing, and how the implementing the types of tasks affects on EFL learners' writing skills. So think the reason for hindering language learning in Iran is that the teaching methods are not affiliated with the new findings of researches especially in the realm of methodology and currently dominant "task-based approach."

Method

Participants

In conducting this research, 30 female EFL students have been chosen within the ages of 10 to 15 who are studying English at Tandis-e-no language institute. They are at elementary level. For homogeneity of the students prior to research a proficiency test KET was given. These 30 students were divided into 2 groups randomly (by chance). One of them is in control group, and the other one is in experimental group.

Each group worked on 2 special task types and their performances were carefully scored. The learners were not aware of the research purpose. Their performances were scored according to some established criteria.

Instruments

Firstly a proficiency test KET (the Key English Test), a beginner _ level English exam, was given to students for determining the homogeneity of students prior (See appendix 1). Then in order to collect the needed data we have used "Academic achievement" as a pretest. We have used this approach in order to evaluate the personal proficiency in their writing background

knowledge. In fact, I have used this kind of testing to determine the students' capability in elementary level of English writing. The participants were pre-tested for homogeneity on the writing proficiency.

Procedures

This phase consists of several stages. First, we selected 30 participants in elementary level and they were randomly divided into 2 groups, and they were in tow-separated class, 15 as a control group, and 15 others as experimental group. Of course, a pretest was administrated for homogeneity (See appendix 2). Then after one week, the treatment sessions began.

In the next stage, in experimental group, initially the tasks are set that enable learners to write in English without having the burden of thinking too much about content and text organization. It is important to expose the learners to the type of text, which they are asked to write.

In parallel texts, students write a new version based on a given text. This works well with factual information in tables like city or country fact files or personal profiles.

In the other stage, they (experimental group) were divided in two sub-groups in which there were 8 students (group A & B). Students A receive 'Adventure Travel' Handout 'A', and students B receive 'Adventure Travel' Handout 'B'. Without looking at each other's handout, they should describe their travel ads to each other and find 8 differences (in both pictures and wording). The teacher follows up the activity by asking them to decide which place they would like to travel to most. Then have them write about an imagined trip to that country (past tense narrative). Finally, they get into groups and read about their short paragraphs. (See Appendix 3)

In the other stage, the teacher put a picture, on the board, in which there are some places. The teacher starts to talk and explain about the location of those places in the picture then writes them on the board by showing some place prepositions such as (on the right, on the left, above, in front of,………). Then the students are asked to write their sentences about the place of their house, school, institute e.t. (See Appendix 4)

In the control class, firstly, the teacher teaches and explains rules, grammar and Principles then asks students to answer the following exercises on their book, according to the principles, and then s check and controls their writings.

Fortunately, all of the participants in groups cooperated well and the researcher's instructions and explanations were followed, thoroughly, because the participants followed all the procedures. All sessions took 12 days (12 sessions). At the 12th session, all of the participating groups were taken the immediate post-test including three writing questions such as writing a note (25-35) for measuring students' productive knowledge. It was lasted 30 minutes. (See Appendix 5)

Design

In this study, a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post- test was performed for the present study to find the effect of the independent variable (i.e., grammar tasks) on the dependent variable (i.e., writing accuracy of Iranian elementary EFL learners) and scores were recorded (appendix F). "Accuracy is the ability to produce well-form and error-free clauses or sentences." (Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

Results

The most important research question of the current study is the following: Do the difference grammar task have any effect on the accuracy of the EFL learners' written performance?

This study was an attempt to scrutinize the effect of types of task on the accuracy development of writing discourse of Iranian elementary learners. Having collected the research data from the experimental and control groups through some tests (proficiency, pre-test, post-test), the researcher used SPSS Statistical Package to analyze the data. In order to answer research questions the data were submitted to some statistical analyses such as: a) Descriptive statistics, b) One-Sample K-S Test, c) Independent Samples Test , d) ANCOVA .

The result of the data analyses are presented in three distinct sections starting with the learners' general English proficiency, followed by the participants' initial homogeneity in writing ability in the pre-test, and then their performance on the post-test.

1) The Preliminary English Test (proficiency test)

The research administered a proficiency test (KET) with writing questions. The ceiling score was out of 20 to estimate the general homogeneity of learners in both groups. The scores obtained from the KET proficiency test were analyzed using Descriptive Statistics. Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for proficiency test scores.

Table1. Descriptive Statistics

Statistics		
proficiency test scores		
N	Valid	40
	Missing	0
Mean		15.0000
Median		15.0000
Mode		15.00
Std. Deviation		2.09762
Minimum		11.00
Maximum		20.00

The table shows the mean value of this proficiency is 15, and the Std. Deviation is 2.097. Therefore, the researcher chooses those participants who got the scores between 15+ and 15- of 2.097 that here it are the scores between 12 and 18. So the number of students were 30, that the researcher chose and divided them in to two groups (control group N=15, experimental group N=15) randomly.

2) Pre-test and post-test (writing)

To estimate the participants' initial writing ability prior to the treatment and to check whether all participants had similar levels of writing ability, the researcher administered a writing test (including two different topics with a ceiling score of 20) as the pre-test between control group and experimental group. A post-test, which was also applied by the researcher to examine the effect of the treatment on the learners' progress in learning writing discourse of the foreign language. The test includes two writing questions with different topics. The ceiling score is out of 20. A K-S test was applied to check the normality of distribution of the scores. The results are

shown in Table 2. An Independent Sample t-test was used. This is for where we are comparing the results of groups that are independent of each other (Table 3).

Table 2. Independent Sample t-test

		posttest	pretest
N		30	30
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	15.2333	14.0333
	Std. Deviation	1.85106	1.06620
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.194	.221
	Positive	.153	.179
	Negative	-.194	-.221
Test Statistic		.194	.221
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.005[c]	.001[c]
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)		.183	.091
Point Probability		.000	.000

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

As demonstrated in Table 2, because the probability figure-marked as "Sig." in this table- is more than 0.05 (here: pre-test .091, and post-test .183),so there is not enough evidence to reject Null Hypothesis. Therefore, the assumption of normality for pre-test and post-test scores is met.

T-test	**Group Statistics**				
	group of students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	experimental	15	14.2667	1.09978	.28396
	control	15	13.8000	1.01419	.21686
posttest	experimental	15	16.6667	.97590	.25198
	control	15	13.8000	1.0000032017	.34087

This Table shows that the average value of pre-test score for experimental group and control group are 14.26 and 13.80 respectively. These values for post-test scores are 16.66 and 13.80

respectively. It displays a somewhat lower mean score for pre-test and post-test in control group. In addition, the scores of pre-test in experimental group is less than the scores of post-test in that group.

Table 3

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
pretest	Equal variances assumed	.055	.816	1.208	28	.237	.46667	.38627	-.32458	1.25791
	Equal variances not assumed			1.208	27.818	.237	.46667	.38627	-.32481	1.25814
posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.940	.175	6.763	28	.000	2.86667	.42389	1.99837	3.73497
	Equal variances not assumed			6.763	25.782	.000	2.86667	.42389	1.99499	3.73834

In this table, because the Levene's test does not show any significant difference, we can assume equal variance in the two groups and therefore the first line of the result is relevant. The significant values for pre-test and post-test scores are .816 and .175 respectively. Because both of them are more than 0.05, therefore we conclude that the variances of pre-test and post-test for experimental and control are equal.

According to output for Independent Sample T-Test of pre-test Sig. (2-tailed) for pre-test score is .23 and it is more than 0.05. Therefore, we conclude that the equality of mean value of pre-test

scores for experimental and control group is met. So there is not a significant difference between the mean values for experimental and control groups. This difference is estimated at .46667 with %95 confidence interval of difference ranges from -.32458 to 1.25791. According to that output for post-test, the Sig. (2-tailed) for post-test scores is .000 and it is less than 0.05. Therefore, we conclude that the equality of mean values of post-test scores for experimental and control group is violated. As a conclusion, there is a significant difference between the mean values for experimental group and control group. The difference is estimated at 2.86667 with %95 confidence interval of difference ranges from 1.99499 to 3.73834.

To analyze the result obtained from the pre-test and to check whether grammar tasks had any positive effect on learners' writing skill, the researcher used One-way ANCOVA analysis as shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Dependent Variable: posttest

group of students	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
experimental	16.6667	.97590	15
control	13.8000	1.32017	15
Total	15.2333	1.85106	30

This table shows the mean value and standard deviation of post-test. Regarding to this table, the mean value and standard deviation of experimental group are 16.66 and .975 respectively. In addition, the mean value and standard deviation of control group are 13.80 and 1.32 respectively.

Table 5. Dependent Variable: posttest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	81.157[a]	2	40.578	60.166	.000	.817
Intercept	2.734	1	2.734	4.053	.054	.131
pretest	19.524	1	19.524	28.948	.000	.517
group	44.492	1	44.492	65.969	.000	.710
Error	18.210	27	.674			
Total	7061.000	30				
Corrected Total	99.367	29				

a. R Squared = ,817 (Adjusted R Squared = ,803)

As illustrated in Table 5, the results of one way ANCOVA show that there was a significant difference between the adjusted means of the two groups on the post-test, F(65.96), P=.000,

Partial Eta Squared=.710. This means that the use of grammar tasks has improved the experimental group's writing skill. There is also a strong relationship between the language learners' writing scores and the use of different types of grammar tasks before and after the research intervention, implying grammar tasks have increased language learners' scores up to 0.51 in comparison to their scores before the treatment, F(28.94), P=.000, Partial Eta Squared=0.51. In this way, the null hypothesis stated in the study "using different types of tasks has no significant effect on EFL learners' writing skill" was rejected.

The descriptive statistics (Table 6) and plot of post-test below shows that the difference values between experimental and control groups in pre-test (after applying any treatment) is considerable.
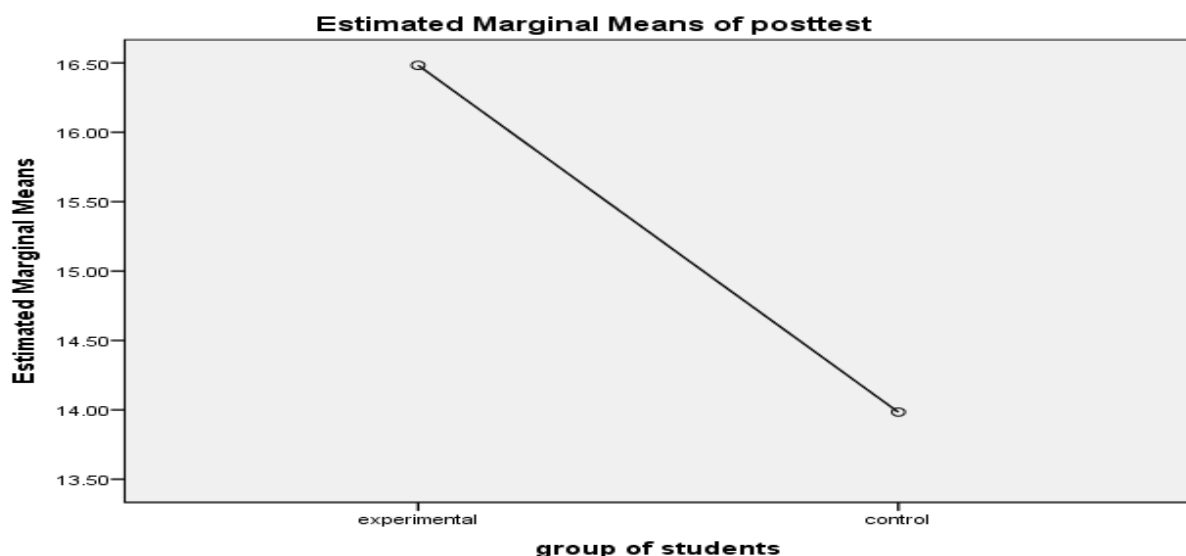
Descriptive Statistics

Table 6 . Dependent Variable: posttest

group of students	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
experimental	16.0000	.00000	15
control	13.0000	1.00000	15
Total	15.0000	1.00000	30

The mean of post-test scores in control and experimental groups are 13.80 and 16.66 respectively.

Plot. Comparing experimental and control groups' Post-Test Mean Score.

Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: pretest = 14.0333

This plot shows that the mean value of post-test scores and in experimental group and control group are 16.66 and 13.80 respectively. The plot indicates that there is a significant increase in the mean value of post-test after the treatment was applied and this group performed better than control group, so the use of treatment was effective.

Discussion

The results of this analysis indicate that using tasks has moderately positive effects on learners' writing ability. This study would seem to support many of the beneficial roles of tasks on EFL language learning and Iranian language classrooms in writing skill described previously. This is true for both learners and teachers who participated in the research and therefore creates a powerful indicator of perceived effect of grammar tasks on developing writing ability. As a result, using and applying different types of tasks as an important element for learning process and must be given enough consideration in language teaching and language classrooms. A number of studies (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Wiilis, 1996; Beley vorman, 1993)have investigated the effect of applying types of tasks on language learning, especially in EFL classes. The result of these studies can be compared with the results of the present research. Most of these studies have supported the positive effect of types of tasks on different aspects of foreign language learning.

The findings of the present study are also in line with the findings of task-based teaching and learning on foreign language learning and discovered that those learners who were actively engaged in learning through task-based learning could make remarkable progress in learning. Prabhu argued that these tasks made the development of writing ability more effective, entertaining and interesting. His findings that did a research based on the effectiveness of using tasks and found that tasks could be a useful English language tool that could raise learners' promotion in different skills.

In addition, tasks could be seen as a great tool for teachers and learners because it could exploit the authentic language situations and prepare the learners for further practice. Therefore, this study follows the same direction as previous study, mentioned above, in this subject. The result and outcome of the present study provided evidence for the usefulness of incorporating types of tasks into curriculum. The learners in the experimental group improved their writing skill and

outperformed the control group. It could be argued that the pedagogical practice of tasks promoted concentration and focused learners, attention on the writing skill. Moreover, using authentic tasks in foreign language learning classes in generally considered having a positive effect on writing skills.

It enables you not only to create an effective or positive environment, but is a source of enjoyment for teachers and students. Language is seen in authentic and real life situations. Anxiety and stress is reduced and the learners are encouraged to take more risks in using their second language. In sum, the research into the impact of using types of tasks on language learning has revealed the usefulness of tasks in improving language learners' writing skill. Thus, incorporating them into language syllabi seems necessary for developing Iranian EFL learners' writing skill.

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Appendix 1

You have lost your Discman. Write a notice to put on the wall of your school.

Say:

-Where you lost your Discman

-What your Discman looks like and how to return it to you

Write 25-35 words.

Write your notice on your answer sheet.

Appendix 2

Read the following sentences and complete them with your own words and sentences. (40-50 words)

"Pay your attention to the tense (time) of sentences."

1) The best thing about my mom is………………..

2) The day I started school was………………………

Appendix 3

TRAVEL (information-gap activity)   A

● Work with your partner. Try to find the **8** differences in the ads.

25% student discount

Explore your World

ADVENTURES TRAVEL

Choose any one of our summer travel specials:

■ Enjoy five days and six nights in exciting Tokyo, starting from only $3,999.

■ Travel to the warm beaches of Rio de Janeiro, and stay four days and five nights, starting from only $1,915.

■ Spend a week in Egypt and travel by camel to the Great Pyramids. Starting from only $2,399.

■ Visit the United Kingdom and see the Queen! Starting from only $3,799.

We make travel fun!
Don't wait. Get your tickets!

Japan

Brazil

Egypt

United Kingdom

Call now and talk to one of our travel experts to plan your summer holiday:
555-9606
Or find us on-line to find out more:
www.AdventureTravel.com

● Work with your partner. Decide together which one place you want to travel to the most.

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Green Tree Town

Appendix 4

Appendix 5

Make sure you write answers to all the questions.

Check your writing carefully for any mistakes.

You are going to the shops.

Leave a note for your friend.

Tell him/her:

a) Which shops you are going to?

b) What you are going to buy?

c) What time you will be back?

Write 25-35 words.

Write your notes on your answer sheet.

Post-test scores group students	Pre-test scores	Experimental
1	14	18
2	14	17
3	14	16
4	15	17
5	15	17
6	16	18
7	13	16
8	13	16
9	15	18
10	14	16
11	14	16
12	15	16
13	16	18
14	12	15
15	14	16

Post-test scores	Pre-test scores	Control group students
16	14	14
17	15	16
18	14	13
19	13	12
20	14	13
21	12	13
22	15	15
23	14	15
24	14	13
25	14	14
26	15	13
27	13	13
28	12	16
29	15	15
30	14	12