

## The Effect of Task-based Instruction on Writing Ability of Iranian EFL Learners

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### **Abstract:**

*Task-based writing is one of the most important and inseparable parts of task-based instruction which has recently received paramount attention. The present study investigated the effectiveness of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in developing writing argumentative essays among Iranian EFL learners at Islamic Azad University of Kerman, Iran. The participants of the study were 63 students from two intact classes enrolled in essay writing course. The data were collected by pre-test and post-test of argumentative essays. The experimental group underwent treatment sessions including task-based instruction of writing argumentative essays while the control group followed the traditional way of writing instruction. Both groups were post-tested after the treatment sessions. The data were analyzed using independent samples t-test to find out any significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of their ability of writing argumentative essays. Paired samples t-tests were also used to see if there is any significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of both groups. The result of independent samples t-test revealed that the experimental group\_ taught by task-based approach\_ outperformed the control group in their post-test. Furthermore, the result of paired samples t-tests showed that the performance of the experimental group differed significantly when they were taught through TBLT. The findings revealed that TBLT seems to be an effective means in developing students' writing ability of argumentative essays. The findings suggest important implications for language teachers as well as syllabus designers.*

**Key words:** Task-based instruction (TBI), writing ability, EFL learners

### **Introduction**

#### **Task-based language teaching (TBLT)**

Recently there has been a growing interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) as an essential part of language learning curricula around the globe. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), task-based language teaching is known as an approach which makes up for the inadequacies of communicative language teaching (CLT) and can be considered as “a logical development of it” (p. 223). With the emergence of communicative language teaching approach in 1980s and its emphasis on communicative ability of language learners, there was a shift from product-oriented to process-oriented syllabuses with three important features of goals, procedure,

and specific outcomes and with an emphasis on interaction as the key factor in language acquisition.

As a matter of fact, a paradigm shift occurred within language teaching from linguistic syllabuses towards analytic syllabuses like task-based approaches. While the linguistic syllabuses advocated the predetermined objectives and procedures for teachers and concerned teachers' point of view, the analytic syllabuses are based on learner-centered views with real life relevance. Task-based language teaching, a learner-centered approach, advocates the shift from teacher-dependence to learner independence and provides authentic parameters within which the students will be able to communicate with each other for a purpose with a clear and practical outcome (Benevides & Valvona, 2008).

Since the term task is the major component of task-based language teaching, its clarification seems in order. According to Skehan cited in Ellis (2003, p. 4), "A task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome". Nunan (1989) has also defined task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally on meaning rather than form" (p.12). Task-based language teaching has been implemented to enhance different language skills. In the following section, a brief overview of task-based instruction of writing will be presented. According to TBLT (Nunan, 2004), any task must involve three stages which include: 1) pre-task stage (the introduction to the topic and to the task); 2) during task stage (the completion of the task depending on the type of activity); and 3) language focus stage (reviewing the task and highlighting relevant parts for the students to analyze).

### **Task-based instruction of Writing**

Writing is an important and, at the same time, a demanding skill, particularly in a foreign language context in which learners are exposed to language just for few hours a week. Writing activities provide learners with the opportunity to express themselves, make essential revisions throughout the writing process, and prepare a final draft (Kim & Kim, 2005).

Task-based writing is one of the most important and inseparable parts of task-based instruction (TBI). Cabral (2003) asserts when the writers are in the EFL language classroom context, their writings show not only their capability to solve a problem, but also their awareness of their own communicative goals. In fact, what happens in most EFL writing classes is the focus on writing mechanics which has been the traditional phases of writing instruction in many English classrooms. However, some current research suggests that the effect of instruction of grammar is insignificant on students' writing skill. As a case in point, Hinkle (1994) supports the idea that if students are forced to focus on the structural accuracy of their language use, they won't write anything significant; or they will produce grammatically correct compositions but

empty in content. He continues that the main purpose of writing is communication (to write about something, in some medium, for some purpose, and to someone), and the emphasis of writing instruction must be put on the effectiveness of texts and not correctness of units of the texts.

Regarding the outstanding role of task-based language teaching in ELT, its integration and implementation in language instructional syllabuses cannot be overlooked. In this regard, the present study aimed to raise the following research questions:

1. Does task-based instruction of writing have any effect on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Does writing ability of control group significantly differ in pre-test and post-test?
3. Does writing ability of experimental group significantly differ in pre-test and post-test?

The corresponding null hypotheses for the above questions are as follows:

1. Task-based instruction of writing does not have any effect on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners.
2. Writing ability of control group does not differ significantly in pre-test and post-test.
3. Writing ability of experimental group does not differ significantly in pre-test and post-test.

## **Literature review**

Task-based approach as a revolution in ELT in the late 20th century has been an established and accepted doctrine in the field of language teaching and it's becoming more and more important in ELT. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the role of task-based language teaching on writing performance of language learners.

In one study, Birjandi and Malmir (2008) investigated the effect of task-based approach on the Iranian advanced EFL learners' writing ability. Their study was an attempt to determine the effect of task-based approach vs. traditional approach on the narrative and expository writings of the learners. There were two control groups as well as two experimental ones in their study. In the two control groups (G1 and G2) narrative and expository writing were taught using the traditional approach whereas (G3 and G4) narrative and expository writing\_ two experimental groups\_ were taught on the basis of task-based approach. After the treatment, a narrative writing post-test was given to the two narrative groups (G1 and G3) and an expository writing post-test was given to the two expository groups (G2 and G4). The results of within and between groups one-way ANOVA revealed that experimental groups outperformed control groups. So, it was concluded that task-based approach was more effective in teaching narrative and expository writing compared to the traditional approach.

Furthermore, the study conducted by Waguey and Hufana (2013) aimed to determine the effectiveness of task-based instructional materials in enhancing the writing ability among students whose writings were checked for nine writing areas (sentence unity, ability to carry out the task with minimal support, sentence emphasis, paragraph coherence, paragraph unity, paragraph emphasis, accuracy, sentence structure, and language features). The result of paired samples t-test revealed the effectiveness of the task-based instructional materials in developing the writing skill of the students. The use of task-based instructional materials significantly increased the post-test scores of the students in paragraph unity, paragraph coherence, paragraph emphasis, methods of beginning and ending compositions and mechanics. The study implied that the use of task-based instructional material can aid students' writing ability.

In much the same way, Ahmed and Bidin (2016) conducted a study on the effect of task-based language teaching on writing skill of EFL learners in Malaysia. In their study, research participants were divided into an experimental and a control group. The data were gathered following a mixed method approach during pretest and post-test. A paired samples t-test was used to determine the statistical difference of the learners' scores in their pretest as compared to their posttest. The result of paired samples t-test indicated that students outperformed in their post-test as compared to their pre-test. On their comments about TBLT, the participants asserted that it enabled them to use their linguistic resources which changed them to more fluent and confident users of English both inside and outside the classroom.

In their article, Parvizi, Khoshsima, and Tajik (2016) also investigated the impact of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on writing performance of the Iranian intermediate EFL learners. There were two groups of forty students of the intermediate female learners studying English in a language institute. They were assigned into two groups including an experimental group of task-based language teaching and a control group of traditional instruction. As a pre-test, students were assigned to write a task at the beginning of the course. In experimental group, instruction of writing was done by TBLT, while the other class followed regular patterns of teaching, namely traditional approach. At the end of the treatment, a post-test was administered to both experimental group and the control groups. Scoring was done on the basis of scoring scale of "expository writing quality scale". The researcher used paired samples t-test to analyze the effect of TBLT approach on the writing performance of the learners. The data analysis revealed that the subjects in TBLT group performed better on their post-test than the participants in the control group. The findings of the study also demonstrated that TBLT would enhance writing performance.

In a similar study, Nemat Tabrizi and Hosseini (2016) tried to explore the efficacy of task-based activities on writing performance of Iranian EFL Learners. The primary focus of the study was to investigate the effect of task-based activities which might develop EFL learners' writing of English as a foreign language. For this purpose, 100 male intermediate Iranian EFL learners were chosen from a total number of 133 and assigned into four groups (2 experimental

and 2 controls) through their performance on Nelson Test. Data were collected through pre-and post-test writing descriptive essays to find any progress at end of the treatment sessions. Data were analyzed through two-way ANOVA and paired-samples t-tests. The results of the statistical analysis demonstrated that the task-based activities could enhance the performance of Iranian learners in writing. In sum, all the above studies confirm the enhancing role of TBLT in teaching writing skill.

## Method

### Participants

The participants of the study were 63 Iranian EFL learners from two intact classes. They were enrolled at two English Essay Writing courses at Islamic Azad University in Kerman, Iran. One class was chosen as the experimental group (n=32) and the other one as the control group (n=31).

### Instruments

The first instrument of the study was a Nelson (Upper-Intermediate and Advanced Placement) Test in order to determine the proficiency level of the participants. This test included 50 items. According to this test, those students who scored between 0-35 were considered as upper-intermediate and the students whose scores were between 35-50 were advanced ones. The other instruments used in the study were two argumentative essay tasks (Task 2 of IELTS Academic Test) selected from *Insight into IELTS* (Jakeman & McDowell, 1999) which the participants had to write about in their pre-test and post-test. The range of students' scores on writing tasks in both the pre-test and post-test was (0-9) according to IELTS band scoring. The reason why argumentative essays of IELTS were selected as the instruments was that these tests are highly standard and the procedures for such tasks entail lots of interaction inside and among groups which is a characteristic of TBLT. Such tasks have real life relevance; as a result, they enrich the critical thinking of the students, provide them with the opportunity to practice their language, and end with a specific outcome.

### Procedure

In order to check the proficiency level of the participants, Nelson Placement Test was administered to them at the beginning of the term. The design of the study was pre-test, treatment, post-test. As a pre-test, students were asked to write an argumentative essay task based on their own knowledge at the beginning of the course. The students in experimental group were taught writing based on TBLT approach during 6 (1 hour and a half) sessions. The class time was divided into three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and post-task. Through the pre-task stage, the topic was introduced by the instructor (one of the researchers) to the students and they were encouraged to activate their schemata. At this stage, the focus was on brainstorming ideas and free writing rather than a focus on form. The task stage had three stages: task, planning, and

report. During the task stage, the students were asked to organize their ideas and write about the presented task. The students worked in groups of four. The instructor walked around monitoring and helping students in case they needed assistance and trying to aid them with what they wanted to write about without directly providing the correct forms. During the planning stage, students were asked to rewrite and draft their writing. Also, peer feedback was encouraged during the writing phase, but they were not allowed to use dictionary because this way they relied on their own lexical and structural repertoire. In the report stage, one or two groups were asked to read their essays in class for comments. During the post-task phase, the structure and organization of essays were fully discussed and there was some practice on the cohesive devices, grammar, content, and word selection. In fact, this phase was “a language focus” phase or “a focus on form” stage. After 6 sessions of treatment, students were administered a post-test. Scoring was done on the basis of a rubric for IELTS test. In order to analyze the data, independent samples t-test was conducted to find out any differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of their ability of writing argumentative essays. Furthermore, paired-samples t-tests were conducted to see if there is any difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of both groups.

The participants' Nelson Tests were scored in the range of 0-50 depending on how many right answers they got; each correct answer was scored 1 and each incorrect answer was scored 0. The students' argumentative essays were also scored in the range of IELTS writing band scoring (0-9) using IELTS rubric for writing assessment including subskills of lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, coherence, and cohesion. In order to avoid any sort of subjectivity in the assessment of writing ability of the participants, their argumentative essays in pre-test and post-test were assessed by two raters (the researcher and a colleague with 11 years of teaching English writing at the university). The students' writings were assessed independently. In order to find out how much correlation exists between the two raters in their scoring, intra class correlation coefficient was calculated. The result showed that the mean and SD of the first and second rater's scoring of argumentative essays were  $4.16 \pm 1.49$  and  $3.98 \pm 1.53$  respectively. As the p-value for intra class correlation coefficient was less than 0.05 ( $p < 0.05$ ), it is implied that there is a high correlation ( $ICC = 0.90$ ) in the two raters' assessment of papers.

## **Results and discussion**

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples and paired samples t-tests. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the participants' writing scores on argumentative essay writing both in pre-test and post-test.

**Table: 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Writing Ability of Control and Experimental Groups (Pre-test and Post-test)**

Time	Group Variable	Control (n <sub>1</sub> =31)		Experimental (n <sub>2</sub> =32)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pre-Test	Writing Skill	3.10	1.14	3.41	1.27
Post-Test	Writing Skill	3.32	1.11	4.97	1.38

As table 1 reveals, the mean and SD of writing scores in the control group were (M<sub>1</sub>= 3.10, SD<sub>1</sub>= 1.14) and the mean and SD of the experimental group were (M<sub>2</sub>= 3.41, SD<sub>2</sub>= 1.27) before the treatment. However, after task-based writing treatment, the mean and SD in the control group were (M<sub>1</sub>= 3.32, SD= 1.11) and the mean and SD of experimental group were (M<sub>2</sub>= 4.97, SD<sub>2</sub>= 1.38).

**Table: 2**  
**Distribution of Students' Scores on Nelson Placement Test**

Group	Level	Frequency	Percent
Control	Intermediate	22	71%
	advanced	9	29%
Experimental	Intermediate	18	56.2%
	advanced	14	43.8%
Total	Intermediate	40	63.5%
	advanced	23	36.5%
Sum		63	100%

Table 2 demonstrates that 22 participants in the control group (71%) and 18 students of the experimental group (56.2%) were at the intermediate level and 9 students of control group (29%) and 14 participants in the experimental group were classified as advanced ones. Totally, 40 students (63.5%) of both groups were considered as intermediate and 23 participants (36.5) were advanced ones.

**Table: 3**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Control and Experimental Groups on Nelson Placement Test**

Group	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Control	31	30.13	7.45	18	43	.21	-1.06
Experimental	32	32.91	7.27	21	44	.01	-1.49
Total	63	31.54	7.43	18	44	.09	-1.25

Table 3 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the proficiency scores on Nelson Placement test. The mean and SD of the participants' placement scores in control group were 30.13 and 7.45 and the mean and SD of experimental group on their proficiency test were 32.91 and 7.27.

#### **RQ1. Does task-based instruction of writing have any effect on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners?**

The first null hypothesis of the present research stated that task-based instruction of writing does not have any effect on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. In order to address this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted (Table 4).

**Table: 4**  
**Independent Samples T-test of the Participants' Writing Ability of Experimental and Control Groups**

Group	N	Mean	SD	T-Test	df	P-Value
Control	31	.48	.51	-6.65	54.29	.000
Experimental	32	1.56	.76			

As the p-value in table 4 reveals ( $p < 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis is rejected which implies the means of control and experimental groups showed a statistically significant difference ( $t = -6.65$ ,  $df = 54.29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The comparison of means of writing scores in both groups revealed that the participants in experimental group could achieve a higher mean ( $M_2 = 1.56$ ,  $SD_2 = 0.76$ ) than the control group ( $M_1 = 0.48$ ,  $SD_1 = 0.51$ ). This implies that task-based instruction could enhance the English writing ability of the learners. The estimated effect size (Cohen's  $d$ ) was  $ES = 1.70$  which is an indicator of a large effect size. Such a result seems congruent with the studies performed by Birjandi and Malmir (2008), Waguey and Hufana (2013), Nemat Tabrizi and Hosseini (2016), and Parvizi, Khoshsima, and Tajik (2016) and this accounts for the effectiveness of task-based instruction in the writing ability of EFL learners.

#### **RQ2. Does writing ability of control group significantly differ in pre-test and post-test?**

**RQ3. Does writing ability of experimental group significantly differ in pre-test and post-test?**

The second null hypothesis indicated that the writing ability of the participants in the control group does not significantly differ in the pre-test and post-test. Moreover, the third null hypothesis expressed that the writing ability of the students in experimental group does not significantly differ in the pre-test and post-test. To test these hypotheses, paired samples t-tests were run (Table 5).

**Table: 5**  
**Paired Samples T-test of Writing Scores of Both Groups in Pre-test and Post-test**

Group	Time	N	Mean	SD	T-Test	df	P-Value
Control	pre-test	31	3.10	1.14	-1.88	30	.07
	post-test	31	3.22	1.11			
Experimental	pre-test	32	3.41	1.27	-11.64	31	.000
	post-test	32	4.97	1.38			

As the p-value in table 5 displays ( $p > 0.05$ ), it can be concluded that writing scores of control group did not show any difference before and after the treatment ( $t = -1.88$ ,  $df = 30$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the second null hypothesis is accepted meaning that control group did not show a significant difference in their writing performance before and after the treatment. However, considering the p-value for experimental group ( $p < 0.05$ ), it can be figured out that the means of writing scores in the experimental group were significantly different before and after the treatment ( $t = -11.64$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Such a result implies that the mean of writing scores of pre-test and post-test of the experimental group was higher ( $M_2 = 4.97$ ,  $SD_2 = 1.38$ ) than their pre-test ( $M_1 = 3.41$ ,  $SD_1 = 1.27$ ). The calculated effect size (Cohen's  $d$ ) revealed the effect size of 1.18 ( $ES = 1.18$ ) which shows a high effect size. Consequently, the third null hypothesis is rejected meaning that experimental group showed a superior performance in their post-test as compared to their pre-test. The results of the present study are in line with Birjandi and Malmir (2008), Waguey and Hufana (2013), Ahmed and Bidin (2016), and Nemat Tabrizi and Hosseini (2016), and Parvizi, Khoshsima, and Tajik (2016). Ultimately, this conclusion can be drawn that using task-based instruction could largely enhance the writing ability of students in experimental group while there was not any significant improvement in the control group scores in their pre-test and post-test.

## Conclusion and pedagogical implications

A task-based lesson usually provides the learners with an active role in participating the activities which lead them from teacher dependence to learner independence. A task-based lesson offers more opportunities for the learners to display their critical thinking and challenge them with authentic situations. TBLT allows students to use the knowledge they have already learned and apply it productively in the task context. An important implication of the study is that if task-based instruction is utilized for teaching English writing when students are provided with the opportunity to experience interaction with their peers as well as their teacher, their writing ability will noticeably enhance. Students usually complain that writing in English is difficult. One possible way to successfully deal with their problem is leading them through the right path by engaging students in pre-task, during-task, and post-task stages when students first experience writing in collaboration with their peers and start writing by themselves afterwards. However, what seems essential is sufficient teacher training for the application of task-based approach by Iranian teachers who still teach English writing with too much focus on forms. Another implication of the study is for syllabus designers to include more task-based activities to challenge the learners with more real-life experiences, to involve them into more interaction, and to help them achieve a tangible outcome. These are just the common features of task-based instruction which are very much advocated throughout the globe nowadays.

Several limitations of the present study need to be acknowledged. The study was limited in having a small sample size ( $n=63$ ), so the results should be interpreted with caution. Further studies may choose larger samples so that their findings can be generalizable. The second limitation of the study is that the effect of task-based instruction only on argumentative essays was under the investigation. Future studies may investigate the impact of task-based instruction on other types of essays such as classification, process, comparison and contrast, or cause and effect. Another limitation of the study was the learners' academic semester that did not allow for the delayed post-test to be performed which could be more revealing about the durability and effectiveness of the task-based instruction. Furthermore, the study was limited in using intact sampling which could not control for the initial differences in the pre-test scores between the control and experimental groups. It is recommended that further research investigate the effect of task-based instruction on other language skills as well. It is also possible to study the comparison of task-based and task-supported instructions (presentation-practice-production) \_known as PPP\_ to determine the effect of each on different language skills.

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