

The Impact of Task Types on Aspects of Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Performance: Accuracy, Fluency, and Complexity

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Abstract. Inspired by the recent surge of interest in EFL writing, this study intended to examine the impacts of three types of language task, i.e., Topic Writing (TWT), Picture Description (PDT), and Text Reconstruction (TRT) on accuracy, fluency and complexity aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. Findings from Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) demonstrated a high degree of accuracy and complexity in EFL learners' performance on Topic Writing tasks, comparing to fluency which was demonstrated to be high in EFL learners' performance on Picture Description tasks.

Keywords: Task, Accuracy, Fluency, Complexity, Writing aspects

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the communicative language tasks have evolved as an important component within curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation in language teaching and learning. In task-based language teaching, syllabus content and instructional processes are selected with reference to the communicative tasks in which language learners need to engage in and outside the classroom; also with reference to the approaches and empirical insights into those social and psycholinguistic processes which facilitate language acquisition. As Skehan [1] asserts, a communicative task is an activity in which, (a) meaning is primary, (b) there is some sort of relationship to real world tasks (c) task completion has some sort of priority, and (d) assessment of task performance is determined in terms of task outcomes. Respectively, Nunan [2] believes that a task is a classroom work that engages learners in completing, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while the attention is focused on meaning rather than on form. Based on a widely accepted categorization, writing tasks in second/foreign language classes are either real-world tasks, which are directly based on the learners' communicative goals, or pedagogic tasks which are designed to develop students' genre knowledge and composing skills. Many pedagogic tasks aim to promote discrete skills, such as improving punctuation, developing pre-writing abilities, or increasing an understanding of rhetorical forms. These tasks are selected on the basis of meta-cognitive criteria, in other words, on the basis of what students need to know in order to build the competence required to accomplish real-world objectives on later stages [3].

EFL teachers can make use of different tasks as teaching materials in their classrooms. Using tasks would be beneficial in teaching writing, because they create new and different situations for students; hence language learning experience would be easier and more interesting [2]. Such a communicative task will help students use their abilities to solve language problems in order to do the task. Writing in a second or foreign language is a highly complex but fascinating activity. Writing needs practicing and internalizing a set of structures that can promote the balanced development of learners' fluency, accuracy, and complexity in the target language. As Richards and Renandya [4] believe, there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult

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skill for second language learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas but also in translating those ideas into meaningful texts.

Second language writers have to challenge higher-level skills of planning and organizing, as well as lower level skills of spelling, punctuation, and word choice. One of the challenges in working on second language acquisition is to address the concurrent need for maintaining complexity, fluency, and accuracy in EFL learners' language. The desire to investigate motors of change contributes to the challenge. The current study was, therefore, an attempt to shed more light on the notion of communicative tasks in EFL language teaching and learning with a specific attention to using tasks in one of the most complex and critical language skills, i.e., writing. Moreover, the major objective in the current study was to investigate whether different task types would have any significant impacts on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity aspects of Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

2. Method

The 80 subjects in this study were selected from both male and female population of Iranian EFL undergraduates (n=170) ranging from 19 to 27 years of age who attended the course of advanced writing in 2010 summer semester at Azad University, Karaj Branch, Iran.

A modified Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was initially administered to randomly sample the subjects. The 80 students whose TOEFL test scores dwelled in a continuum of one standard deviation below and above the mean score were selected as the experimental group in the study. The test contained 50 multiple choice listening comprehension items, 40 multiple choice on structure and written expressions items, and 50 reading comprehension items.

Three types of writing tasks including a Topic Writing Task (TWT), a Picture Description Task (PDT), and a Text Reconstruction Task (TRT) were designed and piloted with 10 students similar to the research subjects in their levels of language proficiency, gender and age. The participants' performance on three types of writing tasks were rated for degrees of accuracy, fluency and complexity by three raters who were professional in language testing.

In order to measure the aspect of Accuracy in participants' writing performance, three raters counted the number of errors in every 100 words. This would indicate how learners were accurate in their writing performance. For the aspect of Fluency, the raters counted the total number of words in the text and then divided them by the total number of seconds/minutes it took to be written. Finally, to measure the aspect of complexity, the T-unit was selected as the rating scale. The raters were supposed to count every clause which was attached to a T-unit (an independent clause). Next, the reliability estimates for the tasks scores proved the results desirably trustworthy and dependable. Finally, an Analysis of Variances (ANOVA) was computed for three types of writing task scores and three aspects of accuracy, fluency and complexity in the participants' writing performance. The obtained results demonstrated statistically significant differences in the participants' performance on different types of tasks.

3. Results and Discussion

As already mentioned, a TOEFL test was administered to screen the participants based on their levels of language proficiency in order to randomly sample an experimental group in a continuum of one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean score. Therefore, 80 subjects were selected to participate in this study. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the TOEFL scores.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for TOEFL scores

| Test | M | Max | Min | SD | N |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|------|-----|
| TOEFL | 61.00 | 98.00 | 21.00 | 1.01 | 170 |
| Valid N | | | | | 170 |

(Listwise)

As Table 1 shows, statistics for TOEFL scores included the mean (M), maximum scores (Max), minimum scores (Min), standard deviations (SD), and the number of EFL learners (N=170). The measures of mean, minimum, and maximum scores all revealed that the test scores were reliably well-centered while the

values of standard deviations showed a rather wide range of TOEFL scores. Next, three types of writing tasks, that is, Topic Writing Task (TWT), Picture Writing Task (PWT), and Text Reconstruction Task (TRT) were administered and rated by three raters who participated in this study. To estimate the reliability of the obtained results, two measures of inter-rater (Table 2) and inter-item reliability (Table 3) were conducted.

Table 2 Inter-Rater Reliability Estimate

| Tasks | r ^{1&2} | r ^{1&3} | r ^{2&3} | Average r | Adjusted S-B |
|-------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------|--------------|
| TWT | 0.62 | 0.69 | 0.65 | 0.94 | *0.98 |
| PWT | | | | | |
| TRT | | | | | |

As Table 2 demonstrates, the adjusted Spearman-Brown reliability index of the raters' scores to the writing tasks was 0.98, statistically significant at a two-tailed $p < 0.5$. Similarly, in the inter-item reliability computation for three types of writing task scores, the average Item Total correlations of $r = .78$ indicated the individual writing task scores discriminated in a manner quite similar to the total scores on writing tasks, though they had done so to varying degrees with correlations ranging from $r = .21$ to $r = .79$ (Table 3). It was also noticed that all the correlation coefficients were statistically significant at a two-tailed $p < .05$.

Table 3 Inter-Item Reliability Estimates

| Tasks | M | Max | Min | SD | N | Skew | r ^{item-total} |
|-------|------|------|------|------|----|-------|-------------------------|
| TWT | 3.60 | 6.00 | 0.00 | 0.31 | 80 | -0.29 | *0.78 |
| PWT | | | | | | | |
| TRT | | | | | | | |

In order to study the possible variations among the participants' performance on different types of tasks, the impacts of the three task types on aspects of accuracy, fluency and complexity were analyzed with an Analysis of Variances (ANOVA).

3.1. Impacts on Accuracy

Demonstrated in Table 4, the participants' mean score in TWT was 1.15 which is much higher than the mean score for PDT (0.48) and TRT (0.39). Similar to mean scores, the measures of standard deviation for TWT (SD=1.485) was considerably higher than those for PDT (0.981) and (0.803) which showed a wide variety of performance on TWT.

Table 4 Accuracy in three task types

| Task | M | SD | N |
|------|------|-------|----|
| TWT | 1.15 | 1.485 | 80 |
| PDT | 0.48 | 0.981 | 80 |
| TRT | 0.39 | 0.803 | 80 |

Similarly, in Table 5, all the F ratios computed in multivariate ANOVA were significant at $\alpha \leq .05$ which proved a vast range of variations in degrees of accuracy traced in the participants' performance on three types of tasks.

Table 5 ANOVA for Accuracy

| Effects | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. | Noncent. Parameter | Observed Power(a) |
|-------------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|----------|------|--------------------|-------------------|
| accuracy Pillai's Trace | .244 | 12.563(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 25.127 | .995 |
| Wilks' Lambda | .756 | 12.563(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 25.127 | .995 |
| Hotelling's Trace | .322 | 12.563(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 25.127 | .995 |
| Roy's Largest Root | .322 | 12.563(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 25.127 | .995 |

a Computed using alpha = 0.05

3.2. Impacts on Fluency

As Table 6 demonstrates, comparison made for the impacts of different types of tasks on the fluency of the participants' writing performance revealed that Fluency mean score was radically high in PWT (27.32), comparing to the mean scores for TWT (16.23) and TRT (15.21). Regarding measures of standard deviation,

the observed pattern followed those in the aspect of Accuracy, that is, a rise for PWT (SD=15.61) comparing to those for TWT (SD=5.82) and TRT (6.18).

Table 6 Fluency in three task types

| Task | M | SD | N |
|------|-------|-------|----|
| TWT | 16.23 | 5.82 | 80 |
| PDT | 27.32 | 15.61 | 80 |
| TRT | 15.21 | 6.18 | 80 |

As it was expected, Table 7 demonstrates all measures of F ratios as significant at $\alpha \leq .05$ which proved a variation in Fluency aspect of participants' performance due to different task types.

Table 7 ANOVA for fluency

| Effects | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. | Noncent. Parameter | Observed Power(a) |
|------------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|----------|------|--------------------|-------------------|
| fluency Pillai's Trace | .400 | 25.957(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 51.914 | 1.000 |
| Wilks' Lambda | .600 | 25.957(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 51.914 | 1.000 |
| Hotelling's Trace | .666 | 25.957(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 51.914 | 1.000 |
| Roy's Largest Root | .666 | 25.957(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 51.914 | 1.000 |

a Computed using alpha = 0.05

3.3. Impacts on Complexity

Concerning the aspect of Complexity, as Table 8 shows, the mean score for TWT (4.85) was higher than the mean for PWT (2.83) and for TRT (1.74). Measures of standard deviation showed the similar pattern of rise for TWT (SD=4.56) comparing to those for PWT (SD=2.82) and for TRT (SD=1.49).

Table 8 Complexity of three task types

| Task | M | SD | N |
|------|------|------|----|
| TWT | 4.85 | 4.56 | 80 |
| PDT | 2.83 | 2.82 | 80 |
| TRT | 1.74 | 1.49 | 80 |

In Table 9, the measures of F ratios proved to be statically significant at $\alpha \leq .05$ which can be interpreted as a wide variation in degrees of Complexity traced in the participants' performance on three types of tasks.

Table 9 ANOVA for Complexity

| Effect | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. | Noncent. Parameter | Observed Power(a) |
|----------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|----------|------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Cmplx Pillai's Trace | .360 | 21.919(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 43.837 | 1.000 |
| Wilks' Lambda | .640 | 21.919(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 43.837 | 1.000 |
| Hotelling's Trace | .562 | 21.919(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 43.837 | 1.000 |
| Roy's Largest Root | .562 | 21.919(b) | 2.000 | 78.000 | .000 | 43.837 | 1.000 |

a Computed using alpha = 0.05

To sum up, the findings in this study prove different types of writing tasks have significant impacts on aspects of accuracy, fluency and complexity of Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. Evidence was in favor of a high accuracy and complexity when the participants were actively involved in Topic Writing task, and fluency inflation when the EFL learners were engaged in Picture Writing task.

4. Conclusion

As Nunan [2] constantly urges, utilizing different types of task opens a window of opportunity for EFL learners to have real-life interactions. Based on the experimental findings in this study, EFL learners experience enjoyable difference to perform differently on tasks of different nature. They welcome new writing tasks more than traditional writing didactics. It is, therefore, recommended that EFL teachers make use of a variety of writing tasks in their classroom as far as they can. If their purpose is to enhance learners' fluency, for example, a picture writing task would be an appropriate activity to join in the classroom; where their emphasis is on accuracy, as it is mostly the case, a topic writing task is the best choice for effortlessly eliciting the required data. Finally, when EFL teachers desperately struggle to redirect their students' attention to a particular grammatical point, a topic writing task can work remarkably.

5. References

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