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

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the effect of post- task activity on EFL learners' writing fluency, 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 randomly assigned into two classes: one experimental group and one control group, 30 people each. Before instruction, the experimental and control group were pre-tested in the classroom. Then, experimental group received task-based instruction, but the treatment period following a task-based approach in which special attention was paid to post-task phase in experimental group. They were written some assigned topics during instruction. 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 findings of the study indicated that there was a significant effect of post-task activity on EFL writing performance. The experimental group achieved a higher degree of writing performance in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency compared to the control group ( $p < .05$ ).

*Keywords:* Post- Task activity; T-unit; Writing complexity; Writing fluency; grammatical accuracy

### **Introduction**

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.

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.

Teachers engage students in classroom activities so that they may pay conscious attention to their errors through revision in post-task activities. It seems that the revised version might help learners improve their writing patterns. The purpose by revising draft is to help learners systematize what they know, and to expand their conscious knowledge of words (Wills, D. & Wills, J. 2007).

So, this study considered the following questions:

1. Does post task activity significantly affect EFL learners' writing fluency?
2. Does post task activity significantly affect EFL learners' writing complexity?
3. Does post task activity significantly affect EFL learners' grammatical accuracy?

### **Review of Related Literature**

According to the National Commission on writing (2006), writing should be given the most attention in the school reform in the following years since it works as a means of transferring the complex thoughts in school and the workplace. Weigle (2002) argued that the proficiency to write appropriately and efficiently in English which leads to language learners' better performance is becoming very distinguished in the global community. Communication across languages is very essential because of many progresses in different aspects of life. Thus, two necessary skills for education include the ability to speak and the ability to write in a foreign or second language. Writing helps an individual to produce written language for academic tasks, to sort through and classify the complex ideas and uninterrupted thoughts on papers. Writing works as means for conveying the information across time and generations and it also works as a means for the expression of knowledge.

#### **Factors that Cause Problems in L2 Writing**

The purpose, organization, and positioning of text are particularly the reasons of L2 writing problems (Paltridge, 2004; Roca de Larios, J. R., Murphy, L., & Marin, J. 2002., Casanove, 2004 ; Johns, 1997; Paltridge, 2004). Thus, investigating the learners' writing processes, especially, the planning process is very critical. It is also necessary to specify the actions of learners in facing with the problems in the writing process because of their poor L2 writing competence. Moreover, it is necessary to study how the planning process influences learners' final written products. Zamel (1983) interviewed with proficient ESL learners and analyzed their written works in order to study the writing processes of them. Zamel (1983) requested eight ESL subjects to report their writing experiences and behaviors. He evaluated the different stages of writing process in order to specify whether learners' compositions demonstrated their writing experiences or not. He found out that proficient L2 writers have various key components in their writing: sense of audience, recursive and nonlinear natures of the writing processes, and proper management of discourse levels. Raimes' (1987) study offered comprehensive information about unskilled L2 writers. In order to investigate comprehensively the writing behaviors of native speakers and to explain writing strategies by think-aloud protocol, Raimes studiedly learners at different levels. She found out that L 1 writers, like L 2 ones, have limitations on the act of writing itself.

### Task Based Learning Method

A different way to teach languages is task based method of learning, a method which helps students by putting them in authentic situations in which oral communication is crucial for performing a specific task. An advantage of task based learning is that it makes students use their skills at their present level, and therefore learning language through using it. Another advantage of the method is using language as a tool for the students to reach a goal. This way using language becomes a necessity (Nasution, 2008). Jane Willis described a model of task-based learning in which the established PPP (presentation, practice, production) lesson is reversed. In this model the students start with the task and after finishing it, the teacher highlights the language used while correcting and adjusting the students' performance. By employing this learning method, students talk over their views in writing the procedure text and through this active class interaction with their friends are able to write without being stuck.

### Tasked Based Language Teaching

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), a well-known language teaching method, is very useful in language learning contexts. Task-based Language Teaching provides a useful and feasible way in order to change a balance between the form-focused and meaning-focused views. Tasks are very significant in SLA studies and they combine SLA and language pedagogy. Some SLA researchers have developed and studied some special task types and they have argued about the theoretical fundamentals of these task types in order to offer them to classroom practitioners from the 1980s till now. Tasks are prominent in language teaching, and they are new tools in order to develop communicative competence. Tasks can provide experience of language as it is used outside the class (Rezaei, 2014)

Communicative task has developed as a prominent component within curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation in language teaching and learning over the last twenty years,. The syllabus content and instructional processes in task-based language teaching are based on the communicative tasks in which language learners need to participate in and outside the classroom.

According to Skehan (1998), a communicative task has some properties:(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. However, according to Nunan (1998), a task is a classroom activity that encourages learners to complete, control, generate, or to interact in the target language. The task concentrates on the meaning rather than on form. Also, Ellis (2003) argues that task provides a framework for communicative performance. Thus, there are some learning opportunities and potential activities for learning behind every task. Task based language teaching (TBLT) is a very well- known approach in many educational settings (Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003).

The role of post-task phase has traditionally been ignored in TBLT. Ellis (2003) argued that post-task phase is an opportunity for the replication of performance and it encourages reflection on how the task was performed and encourages attention to form in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task.

Bygate, (1996) and Lynch and McLean, (2001) found out that the learners' production improves and their complexity grows by replication of the task and their fluency increases clearly. It obvious that replication of a task and working on it for the second time can enhance the opportunity for fluency and correctness. There has been no research comparing the learner production.

#### Writing in Task-based Class for EFL Learners

Nowadays, composing has become very significant in lives of much of the population of the world and many dominant languages speakers are surrounded by written materials. Writing is very significant activity and it requires much skill and effort especially in foreign language contexts where the learners are exposed to language input only for few hours a week (Kim & Kim, 2005). Writing has received little attention in English language teaching in spite of its significance. According to Richards (1990), “ the nature and significance of writing have traditionally been underestimated in language teaching” (p. 106) Moor( as cited in Tilfarlioglu and Basaran, 2007, p. 141) argued that "while writing activities provide learners with the opportunity to witness their own advancements, reconsider the final draft, and make essential editions throughout the writing process”. Finding the best way to enhance the process and result of pedagogical second language (L2) learning and teaching has been one of the most significant and widely studied fields in second language acquisition (SLA) research during the last two decades. This issue is very critical in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. The input and practice opportunities out of the EFL classrooms are so rare for the learners. Thus, the pedagogical tasks offer suitable target language samples to learners and these tasks provide the production opportunities to the learners in order to negotiate. In order to reach the special pedagogical outcomes, teachers and researchers should choose and implement particular communicative tasks (Murphy, 2003). The tasks should be precisely devised in order to lead students to the intended goals. Murphy (2003) investigated the factors that influence on learning outcomes. He also studied the role of individual learner, the task performance, and the context where the task is implemented.

#### Learners' Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity in the Target Language

Some structures, which enhance a balanced development of learners' fluency, accuracy, and complexity writing in target language, need to be practiced. According to Skehan (1998), "the more the task is planned, the less computational work needs to be done during the task performance. Things being equal, the result is more, when attention is given as a general tool to achieve a variety of goals such as greater fluency, accuracy, and complexity" (p. 73).

The learners who concentrate on accuracy produce slower and less complex speech, but they speak confidently. The learners, who focus on complexity, usually generate new structures of language features, and they usually make mistakes. Finally, Skehan and Foster (1997), argued that the learners who focus on fluency comprehensively, focus less on accuracy and complexity. This argument confirmed Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) study about controlled and automatic processing. Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) investigated the extent of concentration on task and the degree of practice with the material in the task. They devised the model in order to explain their findings where different tasks needed different degrees of processing. Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) used controlled and

automatic as two components of processing and they argued that when a task requires little attention and processing energy, the automatic processing happens. However, when a task requires extensive concentration and mental operations, controlled processing happens.

Task repetition is considered as an influential strategy in order to enhance accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Ellis (2005, 2008), argued that task repetition is a significant kind of planning. According to Bygate and Samuda (2005, p. 43) "task repetition is the repetition of the same or slightly altered task- whether the whole tasks, or parts of a task". Bygate (2001) confirmed this hypothesis that task repetition can contribute to language performance. According to Bygate (2001, p. 29) "part of the job of conceptualization, formulation, and articulation done at the first time is stored in the learners' memory and could be used for second time". Ellis (2003), as a result, argued that task repetition can enhance the quantity of the output, the quality of fluency, and complexity.

### Methodology

#### Participants

The participants to the study included 60 EFL students in two intact classes conveniently sampled from among 120 intermediate, female EFL learners between 18 to 25 years old 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 university of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. These 60 students were randomly assigned into two classes: one experimental group and one control group.

#### Instruments

In order to collect data, two tests were used:

**The 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.

**The 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.

#### Design of the Study

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

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

### Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedure started in summer 2014 at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Tehran. The participants to the study included 60 EFL students in two intact classes conveniently sampled at Iran Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. These 60 students were randomly assigned into two classes: one experimental group and one control group, 30 people each. 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 PET exam. 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.*"

### Scoring Procedure

Both Essays in pre-test and post-test were scored for a range of dependent variables. Measures of fluency, complexity, and accuracy were used to evaluate the quality of the participants' written production.

### Data Analysis

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. MANCOVA is the multivariate version of ANCOVA.

MANCOVA determines whether there are statistically reliable mean differences among groups, after adjusting for the effects of one or more covariates.

To check the normality of the distribution of test scores, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run. Table 1 below illustrates the results of this test.

**Table 1**  
**One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test**

		Pre.	Post.	Pre.	Post.	Pre.	Post.
		Accuracy	Accuracy	Complexity	Complexity	Fluency	Fluency
N		60	60	60	60	60	60
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	10.2667	6.0333	.9250	1.3613	10.7533	11.4850
	Std. Deviation	5.17447	2.48362	.39300	.55289	2.01111	3.18049
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.102	.095	.158	.134	.066	.065
	Positive	.102	.094	.158	.134	.063	.065
	Negative	-.055	-.095	-.074	-.070	-.066	-.055
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.791	.733	1.225	1.040	.509	.502
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.558	.656	.100	.229	.958	.962

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

As it is clear from Table 1, the values obtained for the scores in both the pretest and the posttest on accuracy, complexity and fluency are all larger than the Sig value of .05 (the last row of the table). This implies that the test scores were normally distributed .

#### Testing Equality of Error Variances

The homogeneity of error variances was tested through Levene's statistic, which tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups. As Table 2 indicates, the results of this test were non-significant as far as accuracy (Sig=.436,  $p > .05$ ), complexity (Sig=.711,  $p > .05$ ) and fluency (Sig=.986,  $p > .05$ ) were concerned. Therefore, these results can be taken as a sign that there were not any significant differences between the variances of the groups.

**Table 2**  
**Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances**

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Post.Accuracy	.616	1	58	.436
Post.Complexity	.138	1	58	.711
Post.Fluency	.000	1	58	.986

## Testing Equality of Covariences

To check this assumption which is assumed by MANCOVA, Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was run. Box's M tests the null hypothesis that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables are equal across groups.

Table 3  
Box's Test for Equality of Covariences

Box's M	3.676
F	.578
df1	6
df2	24373.132
Sig.	.748

As the data in Table 3 show, the Box's Sig. value of .748 is much larger than the critical P value of .05 which is an indication of the equality of covariance matrices for the groups.

## Homogeneity of Regression Slopes

This assumption was checked by measuring the interaction between groups and the covariates (pretest scores for accuracy, complexity and fluency). As the data summarized in Table 3 show, the Sig. value obtained for interaction between groups and pretest scores for accuracy, complexity and fluency as covariates indicated in rows for Groups \* Pre.Accuracy, Groups \* Pre.Complexity, and Groups \* Pre.Fluency were all larger than .05, which indicated that interactions among the independent variable and covariates were not significant and the assumption of the homogeneity of the slope of regression lines was met.

**Table 4**  
**Homogeneity of Regression Slopes**

Between-Subjects Factors			
	Value	Label	N
Groups	1.00	Experimental	30
	2.00	Control	30

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	Post.Accuracy	81.559 <sup>a</sup>	7	11.651	2.146	.055
	Post.Complexity	5.626 <sup>b</sup>	7	.804	3.367	.005
	Post.Fluency	276.451 <sup>c</sup>	7	39.493	6.410	.000
Intercept	Post.Accuracy	11.788	1	11.788	2.171	.147
	Post.Complexity	.245	1	.245	1.028	.315
	Post.Fluency	49.314	1	49.314	8.004	.007

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Groups	Post.Accuracy	7.868	1	7.868	1.449	.234
	Post.Complexity	.165	1	.165	.692	.409
	Post.Fluency	.291	1	.291	.047	.829
Pre.Accuracy	Post.Accuracy	7.935	1	7.935	1.461	.232
	Post.Complexity	.212	1	.212	.889	.350
	Post.Fluency	33.913	1	33.913	5.505	.023
Pre.Fluency	Post.Accuracy	22.078	1	22.078	4.066	.049
	Post.Complexity	1.737	1	1.737	7.279	.009
	Post.Fluency	4.645	1	4.645	.754	.389
Pre.Complexity	Post.Accuracy	2.107	1	2.107	.388	.536
	Post.Complexity	.061	1	.061	.256	.615
	Post.Fluency	62.225	1	62.225	10.100	.002
Groups * Pre.Accuracy	Post.Accuracy	.043	1	.043	.008	.929
	Post.Complexity	.250	1	.250	1.049	.310
	Post.Fluency	18.913	1	18.913	3.070	.086
Groups * Pre.Complexity	* Post.Accuracy	14.645	1	14.645	2.697	.107
	Post.Complexity	.060	1	.060	.251	.619
	Post.Fluency	2.975	1	2.975	.483	.490
Groups * Pre.Fluency	Post.Accuracy	4.485	1	4.485	.826	.368
	Post.Complexity	.005	1	.005	.023	.880
	Post.Fluency	.005	1	.005	.001	.978
Error	Post.Accuracy	282.375	52	5.430		
	Post.Complexity	12.410	52	.239		
	Post.Fluency	320.366	52	6.161		
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 = .224 (Adjusted R Squared = .120)

b. R Squared = .312 (Adjusted R Squared = .219)

c. R Squared = .463 (Adjusted R Squared = .391)

After checking the normality assumptions, and making sure we can 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.

Table 5  
Descriptive Statistics for the Groups

	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Post.Accuracy	Experimental	5.4667	2.43159	30
	Control	6.6000	2.44385	30
	Total	6.0333	2.48362	60
Post.Complexity	Experimental	1.5900	.50179	30
	Control	1.1327	.51181	30
	Total	1.3613	.55289	60
Post.Fluency	Experimental	12.5600	3.22903	30
	Control	10.4100	2.78609	30
	Total	11.4850	3.18049	60

Table 5 displays the mean scores for the experimental group, and the control group on accuracy (EX. 5.46 vs. CON. 6.60), complexity (EX. 1.59 vs. CON. 1.13), and fluency (EX. 12.56 vs. CON. 10.41).

Table 6  
Pairwise Comparisons

Dependent Variable	(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. <sup>a</sup>	95% Confidence Interval for Difference <sup>a</sup>	
						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 the results displayed in Tables, it can be concluded that 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.

### **Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings**

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

The results of this study show that both treatment groups made gains from the pretest to posttest which is an indicator of positive influence of input based and output based instruction on teaching grammar. This achievement subscribes to this point that teaching grammar directly can be beneficial. However, it is necessary to mention that the output group outperformed the input group.

This finding is not in compliance with what Krashen and Terrell (1983) contend. They believe it is not necessary to teach grammar directly and orally because it does not lead to language acquisition. Krashen (1985) introduces the notion of comprehensible input hypothesis to second language acquisition and may even intervene with the natural process of acquisition (Krashen, 1981). He contends that natural exposure to enough amount of comprehensible input provides learners with the opportunity to acquire language. In his words, the only mechanism for acquiring language is through exposure.

### **Practical Implications**

The results of the present study indicate that post- task activity can be significantly influential on EFL students writing performance. Practicing post- task activity as shown in this study can be an efficient instructional tool for teachers. This study also suggest that post-task activity needs full engagement of the teacher in task- based instruction of the writing process and it necessities the teachers' reflection while post- task activities practiced.

It is believed that post- task employment in teaching and learning environment should be encouraged and expected by language institute administrative, teachers, educator, material developers, syllabus designers and so many others. But: The practical and pedagogical implications of this study can contribute to the career of three groups. This study helps teachers find innovative ways to improve the writing performance. In the post -task phase of this study the teacher addressed the error with the whole class.

In post- task activity the teacher role is critical. The teachers must be obtainable for obligatory support and problem solving in language learning environment providing students with chances to modify the writing performance.

Another implication of the study corresponds to learners. Concerning the effects of teachers' role on students' engagement, by increasing time to provide planning for teaching writing tasks in terms of acquisition- oriented activities in EFL classes, their students' engagement will increase too. So, changes could be made in Iran material development.

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