

The Effect of Integrated and Independent Tasks on English Foreign Language learners' writing ability

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the difference of integrated writing task of the TOFEL iBT candidates in comparison with independent writing task on Iranian EFL learners writing performance. The initial population for the study was 50 junior EFL students. To get more homogeneity, participants were selected among those who were studying in the third year of university in EFL major. They were male and female students. They were all from Azad university of Tehran-, central branch with the age range of 20-22. Thirty three students were recognized as being at the intermediate level of proficiency. Three students quitted collaborating with the researcher. So, the number of participants decreased and out of them 30 was randomly assigned to two groups. The researcher grouped the learners into two fifteen groups. The first group who has received the integrated type of writing as the method of writing practice during the course of advanced writing at the university control group and the second group who has been taught the independent type of writing as the method of learning how to write. In the first group, the learners were given the writing that accompanied with graphic interpretation and description whereas the second group was given only a topic for essay writing. The results revealed that the integrated-task group outperformed the independent-task group in writing scores.

Key Term: integrated task, independent task, TOFEL iBT, collaborating, intermediate

1. Introduction

Writing is considered as the most difficult skill for language learners because they need to have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge about the rhetorical organizations, appropriate language use or specific lexicon with which they want to communicate to their readers. Beside, writing is one of the most important skills in learning a foreign language the nature of which has become clearer nowadays. It involves the development of an idea, the capture of mental representations of knowledge, and of experience with subjects (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992).

In fact, the field of second language writing is an area affecting the lives of many people at institutions around the world where they must submit high quality written work in a language they did not learn as native speakers. However, measuring writing ability, especially writing ability in a second language (L2), is never an easy task. Considering the role of writing in higher education, the writing ability of L2 writers is very likely to be evaluated in large-scale tests to make decisions as to their preparedness for postsecondary study. In order to be able to write effectively one should have sufficient knowledge of what to write and how to organize the language. Nunan (2001) considers that being able to produce a piece of writing which is coherent, fluent and extended is the most difficult thing to do in language. Writing is a special skill that even native speakers may not master it.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1. The definition of the task

In teaching, it is an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal. A number of dimensions of tasks influence their use in language teaching. These include:

Goals – the kind of goals teachers and learners identify for a task
procedures – the operations or procedures learners use to complete a task

Order – the location of a task within a sequence of other tasks
pacing – the amount of time that is spent on a task

Product – the outcome or outcomes students produce, such as a set of questions, an essay, or a summary as the outcome of a reading task

Learning strategy – the kind of strategy a student uses when completing a task

Assessment – how success on the task will be determined participation – whether the task is completed individually, with a partner, or with a group of other learners

The concept of task is central to many theories of classroom teaching and learning, and the school curriculum is sometimes described as a collection of tasks. From this viewpoint, school work is defined by a core of basic tasks that recur across different subjects in the curriculum. The teacher's choice of tasks determines learning goals, how learning is to take place, and how the results of learning will be demonstrated. In second language teaching, the use of a variety of different kinds of tasks is said to make teaching more communicative (see communicative approach) since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

2.2. Independent writing task

Independent writing tasks are believed to offer a more valid demonstration of underlying writing ability in comparison to indirect writing assessment (e.g., multiple choice items) as they elicit actual writing performance rather than working on morphological and syntactic aspects of the target language (Camp, 1993) similar to what is expected in most of the indirect methods. Nevertheless, independent tasks have been criticized by many researchers (Gebriel & Plakans, 2009; Plakans, 2007; Gebriel, 2006; Weigle, 2002, 2004; Cho, 2003; Cumming, Kantor, Powers, Santos, & Taylor, 2000; Leki & Carson, 1997; Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1996). Given this criticism, integrated tasks have been regarded as an alternative component in writing tests.

2.3. Integrated writing task

Integrated writing tasks put forward an authentic measure for the writing skill (Cumming et al., 2000; Feak & Dobson, 1996; Guo, 2011; Read, 1990; Weigle, 2002, 2004; Yang, 2009) and as such have increasingly become a popular component in both large-scale writing and academic writing assessments (Gebriel, 2009; Gebriel & Plakans, 2009, Plakans & Gebriel, 2012, Weigle & Parker, 2012). In recent years, the TOFEL iBT has included these tasks along with independent writing tasks in its writing section (Educational Testing Service, 2005). As Cumming, Kantor, Powers, Santos, and Taylor (2000) claim, authenticity is the most important justification for inclusion of integrated writing tasks in the new Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL). These tasks measure the test takers' writing ability in academic settings and require test takers to exemplify "real-life English-language usage in university lectures, classes, and laboratories" (Educational Testing Service, 2007, p.6).

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In typical academic contexts, language writing tasks often combine language skills including reading, listening, and writing. In activities such as summarizing, for instance, students work on reading material(s), interact with ideas expressed by the author, and write the summary (Delaney, 2008). Thus, the motivation for inclusion of integrated writing tasks in the new generations of writing tests, according to Yang (2009), is that these tasks are "reflective of the real use of language that occurs in academic contexts" (p. 3). Lewkowicz (1997) believes that integrated tasks are intended to intimately resemble the language situations that students often experience in academic contexts (as cited in Gebriel, 2009). Yang (2009) verifies that in academic contexts students in most of their writing tasks work with source material(s) to identify, synthesize, connect, and manipulate data in their writing. She adds that the integrated writing tasks are similar to real-life academic writing tasks in that both require test takers to combine multiple language skills.

In terms of potential consequences, it has been agreed that the authentic nature of integrated writing tasks leads to a positive washback effect (Cumming, Grant, Mulcahy-Ernt, & Powers, 2004; Cumming et al., 2000; Esmaceli, 2002; Feak & Dobson, 1996; Weigle, 2004). That is, integrated writing tasks by asking test takers to produce authentic language similar to what they experience in real academic contexts encourage similarly authentic content in language curricula and teaching (Guo, 2011). Weigle (2004) believes that including such tasks in high stakes exams might make teachers and learners feel the need for skills that represent language usage in real academic writing contexts rather than relying solely on strategies for five paragraph writing.

Yang (2009) cites researchers (Lewkowicz, 1997; Wesche, 1987) who assume that authenticity of integrated writing tasks may improve predictive validity of writing assessment. Researchers have regarded fairness or accessibility as another advantage of integrated writing tasks (Yang, 2009). Source material(s) in integrated writing tasks are intended to support fairness of writing tests by minimizing topic effect (Read, 1990; Weir, 1993, as cited in Yang, 2009). In the writing or testing literature, topic effect is considered as one of the well-defined factors affecting writers' performance (Clapham, 1996). In independent writing tasks, the assigned topics may be unknown to some test takers and thus negatively affect their performance due to their lack of background knowledge (Guo, 2011). In contrast, integrated writing tasks by providing source material(s) can support test takers who may lack related knowledge or experience on the assigned topic (Reid, 1990; Wallace, 1997; Weigle, 2004; Weir, 1983, as cited in Guo, 2011). So this study was an attempt to investigate the answer to the following research question:

Q: Is there any significant difference between foreign language learners writing ability who acquire the writing skill through integrated and independent method of teaching writing?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The initial population for the study was 50 junior EFL students. To get more homogeneity, participants were selected among those who were studying in the third year of university in EFL major. They were male and female students. They were all from Azad university of Tehran-, central branch with the age range of 20-22. Thirty three students were recognized as being at the intermediate level of proficiency. Three students quitted to collaborate with the researcher. So, the number of participants decreased and out of them 30 was randomly assigned to two groups. The rest were excluded.

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. Homogeneity Test

Samples were selected among the population of 76 students. The sampling process was performed on a continuum (from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate). In order to have homogeneous groups and real-intermediate level students, the first part of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) containing 40 questions was performed. The test helped the researcher to make sure if all of the participants were at the intermediate level of proficiency. The test has been developed by Oxford University Press in 2001, after consultation with many teachers to assess the subject's knowledge of the key language as well as their receptive and productive skills (see appendix A).

3.2.2. TOFEL iBT

In the current study, the writing sections of TOFEL iBT test were selected to measure writing performance in the form of a pretest and posttest.

3.3. Procedure

The present study applies the TOFEL iBT integrated and independent writing test as an independent variable and EFL learners' writing grades as a dependent variable which has a relation with the effect of writing type. The researcher grouped the learners into two fifteen groups. The first group who has received the integrated type of writing as the method of writing practice during the course of advanced writing at the university control group and the second group who has been taught the independent type of writing as the method of learning how to write. In the first group, the learners were given the writing that accompanied with graphic interpretation and description whereas the second group was given only a topic for

argumentative writing. All of the tasks were regarded standard tasks in which were drawn from TOFEL iBT tests.

3.4. Data collection

3.4.1. Procedure for eliciting OPT data

OPT was administered among the total of 76 junior and senior translation students a week before the main experiment starts. The results of the OPT revealed that 30 (63.15%) of the participants were qualified for the study including 20 women and 10 men. The administration of the test took about 60 minutes. The placement test was administered in a single session. Students, whose scores on the test were between 161 and 197 according to OPT testing scale were known as advanced language learners.

3.4.2. Procedure for integrated writing tasks

In this phase, the writing tasks that were involved the description and interpretation of graphs and pie charts were given to students in order to describe and interpret them. This phase was continued 15 sessions and in every session a new task was given to students to write. At the end of the session the writings were gathered by researcher. Then the writing tasks were rated by two different raters.

3.4.3. Procedure for independent writing tasks

In this phase, the writing tasks were involved the essay writing tasks in which some topics were given to students to write essays. This phase was continued 15 sessions and in every session a new task was given to students to write five paragraphs at least 300 words. At the end of the session, the essays were gathered by researcher. The essays were scored based on the Evaluative Criteria Checklist for Essay Writing by two raters.

3.5. Pilot study

As Mackey and Gass (2005) claim, pilot testing is conducted to revise the materials and methods. They argue that a pilot study indicates the feasibility and usefulness of the data collection methods and instruments. In order to find the possible deficiencies and problems of the process of data collection and to prevent possible failures and to gain replicable results, prior to the main study, the instruments were piloted.

3.5.1. Participants and data collection

Ten advanced students, including 5 male and 5 female EFL junior students participated in the pilot study. The procedure was conducted in a single session. Instruments and procedure of the main study were applied as well.

4. Results

First the descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum scores related to the performance of the students on the tasks are provided in the following table.

4-4: Descriptive statistics of the students' mean score

Task	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Independent	15	13.5247	.71243	12.35	14.50
Integrated	15	14.8333	1.14143	13.02	16.44

Table 4-5: Results of independent-samples test

T-test for Equality of Means			
T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
-3.767	28	.001	-1.30867

Eta squared = $-3.767^2 / (-3.767^2 + (28)) = 0.33$

The results in tables 4-4 and 4-5 are interpreted as follows: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the writing tasks scores for the experimental groups. There was a significant difference in scores for the independent-task group (M=13.52, SD=.71) and integrated-tasks group [M=14.83, SD=1.14; $t(28) = -3.767$, $p = .001$, two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -1.30, 95% CI: -1.30867 to 1.30867) was very large (eta squared = .33). This rejects the research hypothesis and

there is a significant difference between the writing performance of EFL learners' who acquire the writing skill through integrated and independent method of writing. The results revealed that the integrated-task group outperformed the independent-task group in writing scores.

5. Discussion of findings

The aim of this study is investigating the effect of integrated and independent writing tasks on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. The results of this study are in line with Cumming et al., 2000; Feak& Dobson,1996; Guo, 2011;Read, 1990; Weigle, 2002, 2004; Yang, 2009 who supported the integrated tasks in language learning. This study confirmed that integrated writing tasks put forward an authentic measure for the writing skill as cited by Cumming et al., 2000; Feak& Dobson, 1996; Guo, 2011; Read, 1990; Weigle, 2002, 2004; Yang, 2009. Integrated tasks have increasingly become a popular component in both large-scale writing and academic writing assessments (Gebril, 2009; Gebril & Plakans, 2009, Plakans & Gebril, 2012, Weigle & Parker, 2012). As Cumming, Kantor, Powers, Santos, and Taylor (2000) claim, authenticity is the most important justification for inclusion of integrated writing tasks in the new Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL). These tasks measure the test takers' writing ability in academic: settings and require test takers to exemplify "real-life English-language usage in university lectures, classes, and laboratories" (Educational Testing Service, 2007, p.6).

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6. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the present study was supposed to answer a question regarding the effect of integrated and independent tasks on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. To be specific, this study focuses on exploring the test performance elicited by the text-based writing tasks, especially in comparison with that in the more traditional independent writing tasks. The results of the study showed that integrated tasks were more effective than the independent tasks and it enhanced the authenticity of learners' writings. Although the advantages of integrated writing tasks are often affirmed, it is worth noting that the majority of the related research has mainly looked at thematically-related integrated writing tasks while little is known about the other type of integrated writing tasks that is also integral to academic writing: text-based writing tasks.

Considering the impact of authenticity in language learning and language instruction in both ESL and English as foreign language (EFL) contexts, research on its test items is greatly needed. The rationale for the concurrent use of the integrated and independent writing tasks is that the two task types would elicit different writing performance. However, this argument is theory driven. Whether this statement holds still remains unclear and needs empirical data to verify. One proposition that underlies the proposed test score interpretation and uses is that academic writing proficiency includes writing products and writing processes test takers use to respond to the writing tasks (Educational Testing Service, 2008). If this proposition holds true, the linguistic features of the resultant written products and the writing processes that test takers generate are expected to vary with score levels. Again, due to scarcity of research, little is known about whether and how linguistic features and writing processes vary with score levels within text-based integrated writing and how they compare with those of independent writing. If writing tasks tap into academic writing ability, test performance (linguistic knowledge and cognitive operations) are expected to vary along with test takers' exposure to and practice of the target language use. If this is true, it is reasonable to speculate that test takers with more academic experience at the tertiary level of education should

outperform those with no or less such experience. This statement should apply even more to the integrated writing if such tasks are better reflective of academic writing tasks assigned in English medium institutions of higher education.

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