

The Comparative Effect of Reading-to-Write and Writing-Only Tasks on the Improvement of EFL Learners' Writing Ability

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Abstract

The ability to write effectively is becoming progressively important and instruction in writing is assuming an increasing role in second and foreign language education. Students' writing abilities have been tested through various writing tasks. Independent tasks of writing or writing-only tasks have been utilized to test students' writing ability; however, they have been criticized for their lack of authenticity and validity and integrated tasks of writing have been proposed as an alternative. In this regard, this study attempted to examine the impacts of reading-to-write and writing-only tasks on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. The main participants of the study were 68 intermediate-level EFL learners divided into two homogeneous groups: experimental and control. After the writing pretest, the experimental group was given reading-to-write tasks for 15 sessions, while the control group was provided with writing-only tasks. Eventually, a writing posttest was administered. The statistical analyses of the collected data revealed a statistically significant difference between the writing ability of the participants of the two groups. To be precise, reading-to-write tasks were found to be more effective than writing-only tasks. The data collected via the reading-to-write questionnaire was likewise analyzed with the results showing a unanimous preference for reading-to-write tasks.

Keywords: reading-to-write tasks, writing ability, writing-only tasks

Introduction

Reading and writing are closely associated as two sides of the same coin, that it is natural for work on either to support work on the other. According to Zhou and Siriyothin (2009), to date, numerous studies have suggested that reading and writing are connected. They further add that studies conducted on the reading-writing connections can be divided into three major categories: studies that examine the impact of reading on writing (e.g. Tsang, 1996; Hirvela, 2004); studies that investigate correlations between reading and writing (Tierney & Pearson, 1983; Olson, 2003), and studies that look into different perspectives on the reading-writing relationship or explain its theoretical bases (McCarthy, 2001; Esmaeili, 2002; Grabe, 2004).

The reading-writing connections have been studied thoroughly in the last decades. As Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) have concluded, one can hardly view reading and writing as stand-alone processes. Tierney and Shanahan (1991) also point out that the view of shared knowledge in reading and writing can justifiably account for reading-writing connections. According to Stotsky (1983) as cited in Langer and Flihan (2000), better writers tend to be better readers of their own writing as well as of other reading materials. Better writers have a tendency to read more than poorer writers, and better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers. Good readers note effectiveness in the writing of others and use those observations to help clarify their own ideas and rhetorical choices about organization, development, and style. Close reading of some professional texts should help learners become better writers in several ways. Understanding the opinions expressed in those texts may spark interesting ideas for learners' essays. Moreover, discovering a variety of ways other writers have used to explain their material should give learners some new ideas about selecting their own strategies and supporting evidence. Learners can familiarize themselves with the effective stylistic devices and diction of other writers and will be encouraged to use language in ways they have never tried before. Last but not least, analyzing the prose of others should make learners more aware of the writing process itself.

Writing-only tasks have often been criticized for their lack of authenticity and validity; therefore, reading-to-write tasks have been proposed to address authenticity and validity concerns in testing writing. Yu (2013) states that the need for authenticity gives rise to the use of such tasks that many would argue have recently been reinstated and revitalized. Cumming (2005) believes that integrated tasks require writers to produce writing compositions that display appropriate and meaningful uses and orientations to source evidence, both conceptually and textually. Delaney (2008) asserts that when L2 learners learn to integrate, they can construct elaborate models for the text structure and this enables them to choose information from the source text, evaluate it, and use it for writing purposes.

Writing-only tasks require students to write about a topic to which they have not been exposed formerly; nevertheless, prior to performing a reading-to-write task, students are provided with a number of texts on the topic they will be asked to write about. Topic unfamiliarity is a problem that students encounter when performing writing-only tasks and it is assumed that this problem can be tackled through giving students reading-to-write tasks. Furthermore, asking students to perform a reading-to-write task, teachers have the opportunity to focus on improving both writing and reading comprehension skills.

According to Grabe (2001), reading and writing processes should be taught together as a combination of skills that can increase learning in all areas. Hirvela (2004) believes that opportunities for meaningful exposure to oral discourse are limited or non-existent in EFL contexts. As a result, students must rely heavily on reading. He emphasizes the importance of providing reading materials to L2 learners as they learn the rhetoric of the language and writing styles through reading. In writing from other sources, a reader has to select relevant information from various sources, organize it, and connect it in a new text (Nelson, 2001).

As Hirvela (2004) further points out, second language reading and writing have traditionally been conceptualized both in research and teaching as individual skills that could be analyzed into and taught as sets of independent sub-skills and strategies. Leki (1993), however, asserts that the separation of reading and writing in EFL classrooms has impoverished the classrooms in two ways. First, teachers are more likely to rely heavily on

personal experience or prior knowledge, without reading. Second, reading is a major source of new knowledge; students are not able to develop the ability to integrate and select new knowledge and information they have already heard.

Weigle (2004) emphasizes that students are rarely if ever asked to write based solely on their background knowledge; instead, before they start writing on a given topic, they are expected to read, discuss, and think critically about the topic. Another argument for the use of a source text as a basis for writing is that it provides a common information source for writers, putting them on a more equal footing in terms of the amount of background knowledge required to respond to a task. Besides, a source text can serve to activate the writers' background knowledge or schemata around a topic, helping them to generate ideas for their writing. In fact, as Ferris and Hedgecock (2005) put it, reading has actually become the basis of writing because the information acquired through reading contains print-encoded messages as well as clues about how the messages' grammatical, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical cues combine to make the message meaningful. Modern empirical research has indicated the significance of integrated skills presentation for improved language learning outcomes, especially the integration of writing skills with other language skills such as reading, listening, speaking, and pronunciation.

Universities, colleges, and testing organizations assess writing through impromptu essay writing tasks which require learners to compose an essay on a general topic in a specified amount of time. According to Plakans (2008), the extensive use of impromptu writing tasks has resulted in research and criticism by second language test developers. Alternative tasks have been developed and administered in response to the criticism on impromptu writing tasks. One alternative to these writing tasks is integrated writing tasks that involve either spoken or written source text in the prompt.

Reading-to-write tasks have been proposed to address authenticity and validity concepts in writing as well as to provide content for test takers' essays. Plakans (2008) argues that reading-to-write tasks create additional challenges such as choosing and developing source texts and precise source use, when test takers use chunks of source texts in their writing without

proper citation. She concludes that a more authentic process of performing is used in reading-to-write tasks and that test takers lean toward them. Esmaeili (2002) holds the view that reading plays a critical role in reading-to-write tasks. He maintains that examining the writing strategies employed by the writers while performing the tasks reveals the significance of reading. He also adds that “one can hardly view reading and writing as stand-alone skills” (p.165). Subsequently, Plakans and Gebril (2012) argue that source texts help students to learn about the topic and shape and support their ideas. In addition, reading supports the language they incorporate in writing for vocabulary, technical words, and spelling as well as finding models for organizational structures.

This study, therefore, attempted to examine the impacts of reading-to-write and writing-only tasks on the writing ability of adult female intermediate-level EFL learners; hence, the following research question was formulated:

1. Is there any statistically significant difference between the writing ability of the students who perform reading-to-write tasks and those who employ writing-only tasks?

In addition, a reading-to-write questionnaire examined the experimental group participants’ attitudes toward performing reading-to-write tasks. Thereupon, the following research question addressed the qualitative phase of the study:

2. What attitudes do students hold toward the process of performing reading-to-write tasks?

Method

Participants

A group of 33 students whose level of language proficiency was the same as that of the participants of the study took part in the piloting stage of the Preliminary English Test (PET). However, the major participants of the study were 68 adult EFL learners. They had previously taken a PET as a prerequisite for entering the intermediate level classes. It is worth noting that the researcher ran a t-test in order to compare the mean scores of the participants on the language proficiency test and demonstrate their homogeneity. Thus the participants were put into two 34-student groups: experimental and control.

Instrumentation

A Preliminary English Test (PET) was used as the first instrument in this study. The PET included three sections through which the four language skills were put into test: Section 1: Reading Comprehension (35 items) and Writing (three subparts); Section 2: Listening Comprehension (25 items), and Section 3: Speaking (four subparts). The first part of the writing test included five questions which were scored objectively; however, the other two parts were scored utilizing the PET analytic scale for rating the writing tasks. It is worth adding that each participant's paper was scored by two raters and later inter-rater reliability was estimated using the Pearson-Product Moment formula.

Furthermore, the participants in both groups were given a writing pretest. They were asked to write a paragraph on a topic chosen by the researcher. The students in both groups were asked to write on the same topic which was, "Studying Individually vs. Studying with Friends". After 15 instructional sessions, the participants in both groups were given a writing posttest. They were required to write a paragraph on the same topic given for the writing pretest. It should be mentioned that both writing pretests and posttests were rated employing Brown and Bailey's analytic scale (1984) for rating compositions. This scale rates students' written texts based on: 1. organization, 2. logical development of ideas, 3. grammar, 4. punctuation, spelling, and mechanics, and 5. style and quality of expression.

Eventually, the participants in the experimental group were given a reading-to-write questionnaire to reflect on the process of performing these tasks. The questionnaire was developed by Plakans and Gebiril (2009) in order to be employed in their study to investigate source use, discourse features, and process in integrated writing tasks. The questionnaire comprised 38 items and included a Likert scale format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and presented statements about the task and the process of performing it.

Procedure

At first, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was piloted on 33 intermediate-level students. Further, a PET was given to the 68 participants

of the study in order to put them in two homogeneous groups. It should be noted that the researcher ran a t-test to compare the mean scores of the participants on the language proficiency test and verify their homogeneity prior to grouping them. Afterward, a writing pretest was given to the participants of both groups in order to show that there was no significant difference between the writing abilities of the two groups prior to the instructional sessions. Both groups were asked to write a one-paragraph text on the same topic. Subsequently, the students in both groups were provided with 15 sessions of treatment. To be precise, the experimental group was provided with reading-to-write tasks, while the control group was given writing-only tasks.

The experimental group was given 15 reading passages on 15 different topics. The reading passages were chosen from reading comprehension books appropriate for intermediate-level students. The selected reading passages were changed to word documents and their readability was calculated. Moreover, the readability of a sample reading passage from the students' course book was calculated. Needless to say, the level of difficulty of the sample passage matched that of the selected passages (level of difficulty = 8). Prior to writing the one-paragraph texts, the students in the experimental group were asked to read the passages given by the teacher. They were asked to extract some ideas from the passages besides considering their own viewpoints on the topics and were then required to write a paragraph supporting their points of view; moreover, they had to give examples to verify their opinions. They needed to incorporate relevant information from the passages appropriately without copying exact phrases. The researcher informed the students that their writing was to be evaluated on the following four factors: content, organization, grammar and vocabulary, and punctuation and spelling. The written paragraphs were rated utilizing a holistic scale for rating reading-to-write tasks. This scale is used in TOEFL iBT[®] and was revised by Plakans and Gebril in 2008.

On the other hand, the students in the control group were assigned writing-only tasks. They were asked to write one-paragraph texts on exactly the same topics chosen for the experimental group. It is also worth mentioning that the process of writing the paragraphs took place in the class so that the researcher could make sure that the students in the control group

did not have access to other sources to obtain information about the topics prior to writing the paragraphs.

At the end of the instructional sessions, a writing posttest was administered to both groups to check whether the given treatment had made a significant difference between the writing abilities of the two groups. They were asked to write a one-paragraph text on the same topic which was formerly selected for the writing pretest. The participants' papers on both pretest and posttest were scored by two raters using Brown and Bailey's analytic scale (1984) for scoring compositions. Further, inter-rater reliability was estimated to examine the degree of consistency between the two scorings. Eventually, the students in the experimental group who performed reading-to-write tasks were given a reading-to-write questionnaire to reflect on the process of performing these tasks. It is worth adding that the questionnaire was given after the writing posttest.

Results

Quantitative phase

As previously noted, at first a version of PET was piloted on 33 intermediate-level students. After scoring the papers, the Item Facility (IF) and Item Discrimination (ID) indices of the objective items were calculated. Based on the obtained results, 15 malfunctioning items were discarded from the test. Then, the reliability of the test was estimated through the Kuder-Richardson (KR-21) formula and the test was found to be highly reliable ($r=0.92$). Table 1 presents the inter-rater reliability for the writing and speaking sections of the PET.

Table 1
Inter-rater Reliability of the Writing and Speaking Sections of the Language Proficiency Test

| Writing | Speaking |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Pearson Correlation | Pearson Correlation |
| 0.80 | 0.85 |

Consequently, the descriptive statistics for the objective items of the language proficiency test, which had earlier been given to the 68 participants of the study, were calculated.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Language Proficiency Test

| Group | N | Mean | SD | Variance | Skewness | Standard Error of Skewness | The Significant Value |
|--------------|----|-------|------|----------|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Experimental | 34 | 70.02 | 7.17 | 51.48 | 0.694 | 0.403 | 1.722 |
| Control | 34 | 72.26 | 6.47 | 41.95 | -0.403 | 0.403 | -1 |

Further, a t-test was run in order to check the homogeneity of the two groups and compare the mean scores of the participants on the language proficiency test. Since the significant values were within the normal ranges of -1.96 and +1.96, both distributions were normal and running a t-test was legitimized. A Levene's test was run to check whether there was any significant difference between the variances of the two groups on the language proficiency test. As illustrated in Table 3, the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their variances [$F=0.33$, $\rho=0.56 > 0.05$]. Additionally, a t-test was run to check if there was any significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the language proficiency test and the obtained result showed no statistically significant difference [$t=1.34$, $\rho=0.18 > 0.05$, two-tailed].

Table 3
Comparison of the Variances and Mean Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups on the Language Proficiency Test

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|----|------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|-------|
| | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | .339 | .563 | 1.348 | 66 | .182 | 2.235 | 1.658 | -1.075 | 5.545 |

The participants of the study took a writing pretest which was scored by two raters; therefore, inter-rater reliability was estimated.

Table 4
Inter-rater Reliability of the Writing Pretest

| | | Rater 1 | Rater 2 |
|---------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Rater 1 | Pearson Correlation | 1 | 0.77 |
| | N | 68 | 68 |
| Rater 2 | Pearson Correlation | 0.77 | 1 |
| | N | 68 | 68 |

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of the writing pretest.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Pretest

| Group | N | Mean | SD | Variance | Skewness | Standard Error of Skewness | The Significant Value |
|--------------|----|------|------|----------|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Experimental | 34 | 9.49 | 2.48 | 6.18 | -0.534 | 0.403 | -1.325 |
| Control | 34 | 8.51 | 2.35 | 5.56 | -0.164 | 0.403 | -0.406 |

It is worth mentioning that the normality of the distribution of the scores on the writing pretest was checked and the obtained results legitimized running a t-test. As shown in Table 6, there was no significant difference between the variances of the two groups on the writing pretest [$F = 0.64, \rho = 0.42 > 0.05$]. Moreover, a t-test was run and the result illustrated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the writing pretest [$t = 1.83, \rho = 0.07 > 0.05$, two-tailed]. It was concluded that the two groups had no significant difference in terms of their writing ability before the treatment.

Table 6
Comparison of the Variances and Mean Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups on the Writing Pretest

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|----|------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | .642 | .426 | 1.833 | 66 | .071 | .9853 | .5376 | -.0880 | 2.0586 |

Eventually, a writing posttest was administered and respectively scored by two raters. Then, the inter-rater reliability was estimated.

Table 7
Inter-rater Reliability of the Writing Posttest

| | | Rater 1 | Rater 2 |
|---------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Rater 1 | Pearson Correlation | 1 | 0.92 |
| | N | 68 | 68 |
| Rater 2 | Pearson Correlation | 0.92 | 1 |
| | N | 68 | 68 |

Following the calculation of the descriptive statistics, the normality of the distribution of the scores on the writing posttest was calculated.

Table 8
Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Posttest

| Group | N | Mean | SD | Variance | Skewness | Standard Error of Skewness | The Significant Value |
|--------------|----|-------|------|----------|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Experimental | 34 | 12.67 | 3.09 | 9.55 | -0.055 | 0.403 | -0.136 |
| Control | 34 | 9.32 | 2.27 | 5.16 | 0.103 | 0.403 | 0.255 |

Since both distributions were normal (Table 8), and the variances were equal [$F = 4.18$, $p = 0.04 < 0.05$] (Table 9), the researcher used a t-test analysis. The results [$t = 5.36$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$, two-tailed] proved that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the writing posttest. Thus it was concluded that reading-to-write tasks would definitely improve students' writing performance.

Table 9
Comparison of the Variances and Mean Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups on the Writing Posttest

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|----|------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Equal variances assumed | 4.184 | .045 | 5.363 | 66 | .000 | 3.3529 | .6253 | 2.1046 | 4.6013 |

Qualitative phase

The participants of the experimental group answered a reading-to-write questionnaire. As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire comprised 38 items, with each item followed by options from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The results indicated that 85.2% of the participants liked reading about the topics prior to writing the paragraphs. Furthermore, 79.3% of the respondents believed the passages to be appealing. It could also be determined that the reading passages given to the students were of great help to them given that 85.2% thought the passages helped them to write better. While 79.3% of the respondents claimed that they used some words from the reading passages in their paragraphs, 20.5% declared that they did not select any words from the texts. Moreover, since the participants were encouraged to extract some ideas from the passages, 85.2% of them stated that besides considering their own viewpoints, they used some ideas from the texts. It should be added that although extracting ideas from the passages was encouraged by the teacher, 14.6% of the participants admitted to having merely used their own ideas. Besides, the participants had been warned not to copy any sentences from the reading passages and as the results illustrated, 94.2% of them followed the instruction. The participants had also been asked not to look back at the texts while writing their paragraphs; however, 14.6% of them admitted to having looked back at the texts when writing. The researchers could also conclude that the reading passages were easy to follow and comprehend for the participants since only 8.8% of the respondents claimed that they had difficulties understanding most of the words in the passages and 5.8% of them found the ideas of the texts not easy to understand. Using examples from the reading passages was also emphasized by the teacher and 82.8% of the participants maintained that they used examples from the texts to support their viewpoints. 97.1% of the respondents believed they learned the process of performing reading-to-write tasks and 76.2% of them believed having access to reading passages prior to writing made the process of writing easier for them.

Discussion

In general, the obtained results in the quantitative phase of the study indicated that reading-to-write tasks had a better impact on the writing ability of Iranian intermediate-level EFL learners than writing-only tasks. As for the qualitative phase of the study, it should be added that the participants' responses to the items of the reading-to-write questionnaire illustrated that they preferred reading-to-write tasks to writing-only tasks given that the reading passages supplied them with relevant words, additional ideas, and confirmatory examples about the topics on which they were asked to write.

The findings of this research are in agreement with Plakans' study (2008), which compared test takers' processes in composing reading-to-write and writing-only tasks. Plakans (2008) asserted that differences were found across the processes of performing the tasks. Writers performing reading-to-write tasks experienced a more interactive process, while those performing writing-only tasks required more initial and less online planning. She concluded that a more authentic process is used in performing reading-to-write tasks and that test takers prefer them to writing-only tasks. Moreover, the findings of this study are in line with another study conducted by Plakans (2009), examining the role of reading strategies in integrated L2 writing tasks. Plakans (2009) concluded that reading plays a major role in the process and performance of integrated writing tasks. It is also worth noting that the results of this study are compatible with a study carried out by Plakans and Gebril (2012). The participants of this study were given a reading-to-write questionnaire. The results illustrated that source use served some functions such as generating ideas about the topic and serving as a language repository.

In conclusion, this study attempted to examine the impacts of reading-to-write and writing-only tasks on the writing ability of Iranian intermediate-level EFL learners. The study comprised two phases: quantitative and qualitative. The 68 main participants of the study were put into two groups: experimental and control. The students in the experimental group were given treatment in the form of reading-to-write tasks and those in the control group received instruction in the form writing-only tasks. Having analyzed the collected data, the researchers concluded that reading-

to-write tasks left a better impact on the students' writing ability than writing-only tasks. Regarding the qualitative phase of the study, a reading-to-write questionnaire was administered among the participants of the experimental group. In general, it was indicated that students preferred performing reading-to-write tasks to writing-only tasks since being assigned to perform a reading-to-write task, they are normally provided by sufficient information, confirmatory examples, and relevant vocabulary items to support their viewpoints on the topics selected by the teacher.

This study holds a number of implications for EFL learners and teachers. As formerly noted, students' writing abilities are tested through various writing tasks. Although colleges and universities mostly have a tendency to test students' ability to write through writing-only tasks, these tasks have been strongly criticized due to their lack of authenticity and validity. Being assigned to perform a writing-only task, students do not have the necessary information to write about the chosen topic; therefore, the outcome is less valid and authentic than it is required to be. Integrated writing tasks have been proposed as an alternative to counterbalance the lack of authenticity and validity of writing-only tasks. Writing-only tasks require students to write about a topic about which they do not have sufficient information; furthermore, they may encounter some difficulties in using appropriate words in their writing assignments. Nevertheless, reading-to-write tasks can be employed to tackle these problems. Reading about the topics prior to writing triggers the students' background knowledge and gives them an opportunity to think about the topics critically; moreover, it supplies them with additional ideas and authentic examples to support their points of view. They can also be provided with suitable vocabulary for their texts. Another implication of reading-to-write tasks for EFL learners could be focusing on the improvement of their writing ability and reading comprehension skill simultaneously. Besides, reading about the topics can expand students' vocabulary knowledge and give them an opportunity to see the correct usage of words in context. Employing reading-to-write tasks, EFL teachers can focus on not only the writing ability but also the reading comprehension skill of their students. Through encouraging students to extract some ideas from the reading passages and later utilize them in their

writing, EFL teachers can examine the reading comprehension ability of their students. Furthermore, requiring students to make use of the vocabulary items embedded in the passages can give an opportunity to EFL teachers to teach some new words to the students; in other words, they can utilize the writing task as a means to broaden the students' knowledge of vocabulary. It is worth adding that reading before writing can create a less stressful situation for the writers. To be precise, students may be concerned with the content of their writing when asked to perform a writing-only task; however, when demanded to perform a reading-to-write task, being provided with some appropriate information and relative vocabulary can minimize the students' tension in performing the task.

Several limitations in this study need to be recognized. First of all, due to the researcher's limited access to intermediate-level students, randomization was not possible and the participants were chosen based on convenient sampling. The participants of the study were female students whose age ranged between 15 and 45. Therefore, the variables of gender and age could not be controlled. As a result of time limitations, the students were asked to write one-paragraph texts rather than five-paragraph essays. Reading-to-write tasks were utilized in the study as the only kind of integrated tasks of writing and intermediate-level students took part in the study as the tasks were not manageable for elementary-level students.

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Biodata

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