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Research Paper

## Task-Based Language Teaching Vs. Conventional Language Teaching: The Case of News Story Writing in EFL Context

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of task-based language teaching on news-story writing in Iranian EFL context. To this end, a quasi-experimental, pre- and post-evaluation research design was employed. First, 78 Iranian BA sophomores majoring in translation at Islamic Azad University, Hamedan Branch, were selected through convenient sampling as the participants of the study. They were then randomly divided into two treatment and control groups--task-based group (TB) and conventional teaching group (TC) respectively. Both groups were initially given a test on news story writing to measure their writing ability at the pre-treatment stage. Then, the control group was taught through explanations abstracted from some deductive plans and reading-oriented method of teaching news story structure. The other group was exposed to a six-week TB treatment based on Willis' TBL framework. The post-treatment researcher-made test was then administered to compare the participants' writing progress. The obtained statistical results showed that the employment of the task-based language learning scenario does not lead to an overall significant improvement of Iranian EFL learners' performance in news-story writing as compared with the conventional teaching of the same skill. This is perhaps due to learners' negative attitude towards TBLT, which originates from the inconsistency of TBLT with the educational philosophy in Iran. Therefore, TBLT programs may need to be modified on the basis of the local and traditional specifications of the education in the target community to be able to develop the learners' news-story writing skill.

**Keywords:** *Conventional language teaching approach, EFL Context, news story writing, task-based language teaching approach, writing skill*

مقایسه‌ی تأثیر دو رویکرد آموزشی « تکلیف محور » و « سنتی » بر تقویت و ارتقای توانایی نگارش خبری به زبان انگلیسی در زبان‌آموزان ایرانی

پژوهش حاضر به مسأله‌ی مقایسه‌ی تأثیر دو رویکرد آموزشی « تکلیف محور » و « سنتی » بر تقویت و ارتقای توانایی نگارش خبری به زبان انگلیسی در زبان‌آموزان ایرانی می‌پردازد. شرکت کنندگان در این پژوهش ۷۸ دانشجوی ایرانی سال دوم کارشناسی رشته‌ی مترجمی انگلیسی در دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد همدان بودند. در راستای رسیدن به هدف پژوهشی مذکور، به گروه « سنتی » با روش رایج آموزش بر پایه‌ی یک کتاب درسی پیرامون ساختار خبری تدریس شد. درحالی‌که، گروه « تکلیف‌محور » از مداخله‌ی آموزشی «



تکلیف‌محور» برپایه‌ی طرح پیشنهادی از سوی ویلیس (۱۹۹۶) به مدت شش هفته برخوردارگشت. با هدف آزمایش و سنجش دو گروه، آزمونی برای ارزشیابی توانایی نگارش داستان خبری پیش و پس از مداخله‌ی آموزشی به هر دو گروه از شرکت‌کنندگان داده شد. نتایج این دو آزمون نشان داد که آزمودنیها در دو گروه آموزشی «تکلیف‌محور» و «سنتی» کم و بیش عملکردی یکسان داشتند؛ به گفتار دیگر، تفاوت بین عملکرد آنها معنادار نبود که این امر میتواند بدلیل نگرش منفی زبان‌آموزان نسبت به رویکرد آموزشی «تکلیف‌محور» باشد که از ناسازگاری روش آموزشی «تکلیف‌محور» با فلسفه‌ی آموزشی در ایران نشأت می‌گیرد. بنابراین، بهتر است برنامه‌ی آموزشی «تکلیف‌محور» بر اساس معیارهای فرهنگی و محلی محیطی که قرار است در آن مورد استفاده قرار گیرد، تعدیل گردد (الیس، ۲۰۱۸) تا بتواند مهارت نوشتن داستان خبری را در زبان‌آموزان تا حد مورد انتظار بهبود بخشد.

**واژگان کلیدی:** رویکرد آموزش سنتی زبان، آموزش تکلیف‌محور، مهارت نوشتاری، نگارش داستان خبری

## Introduction

Writing is considered as one of the two productive skills and an urgent priority in language teaching. In a language learning program, to teach writing skill is an educational goal of marked preference. Thus, providing EFL learners with practice-focused training is definitely an effective strategy.

News story writing as a specific domain in language teaching possesses a great functional significance as an academic requirement as well as a professional prerequisite. Viewing the context of language education in Iran, it turns out that language teaching in general and news-story writing in particular have followed a theory-focused approach pursued on a mono-lingual scale; a claim that can be confirmed empirically as well as by drawing on experience. Thus, with respect to the fact that learning a practical language skill can lead to better results in a more practice-oriented setting, the current study works under the premise that using task-based language can promote news story writing to a higher level. In what follows, we will have a glance at the related literature to gain a brief view of the pros and cons on using either the conventional language teaching approach or task-based language teaching and some of the paths taken by some researches in teaching the skill of writing in an EFL context.

The main objective of the present study is to compare and contrast the overall and subskill news-story writing performance of the two groups under study, i.e. conventional teaching (CT) group and the TB language teaching group, to find out which language teaching approach is more efficient in reinforcing the students' news story writing skill. Besides, the specific objectives of this study are: 1) To find out if TB language methodology can affect the Iranian EFL learners' overall performance in news story writing in comparison with the conventional language teaching and 2) To determine in what ways the TB language methodology in news story writing can improve the subskill components in news story writing ability (efficient use of Wh/H data, vocabulary choice, spelling and punctuation, context balance and fairness, consistency of style, structure and simple language, story length, headline writing) of Iranian EFL learners in comparison with the conventional language teaching.

Based on the above-mentioned objectives, the current study has tried to find answers to the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Is there any significant difference between the EFL learners' overall performance on news-story writing in TB and CT groups after the experimental intervention?

**RQ2:** Is there any significant difference between the learners' performance on the subskills of news-story writing in TB and CT groups after the experimental intervention?



### Literature Review

TBLT appeared as a reaction against the weak points of conventional approaches to second/foreign language teaching. On the one hand, many researchers favor TBLT over conventional ones (Bowen, 2018; Ellis, 2009; frost, 2006; Carless, 2003; Willis and Willis, 2001; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Long, 1985). For instance, Long (1985) emphasized that “there is no reason to assume that presenting the target language as a series of discrete linguistic or sociolinguistic teaching points is the best, or even a way to get learners to synthesize the parts into a coherent whole” (p. 79) and then he suggested TBLT as an “integrated solution to both syllabus and methodological issues” (Long, 1985, p. 89). Prabhu (1987) also argued that “the development of competence in a second language requires not systematization of language input or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication” (p.1) and consequently, he proposed tasks as the best means for providing the context for communicative language learning. Nunan (1989) too mentioned that in the conventional language teaching, there is a division between the syllabus and methodology while in TBLT, the starting point would be choosing the tasks which is a significant issue for communicative language teaching.

On the other hand, other researchers (Ellis, 2018; Shehadeh, 2012; Carless, 2012; Butler, 2011 among others) assert that using TBLT in some educational contexts like Eastern countries, where learners are not competent enough and their educational philosophy and culture are not in parallel of Western countries where TBLT has emerged, is not successful in producing an intended and desired result. As an example, Watson-Tod (2006) conducted a study regarding the evaluation of TBLT program at Thailand University and the findings showed that the application of the TBLT in this educational context is associated with some practical problems and, therefore, TBLT is not effective enough in this context and should be adapted to that particular educational context. Another instance is Richards and Rodgers’ study (2014), which demonstrates that TBLT should be used as a ‘partial approach’ along with a conventional method in contexts which are of different philosophical education from western countries. In the same vein, Littlewood (2014) concluded that TBLT is not fruitful in some educational contexts like China that “education is conceived more as a process of knowledge accumulation than as a process of using knowledge for immediate purposes” (p. 653). Finally, Ellis (2018) underscored that TBLT may not be compatible with the educational systems or teaching/learning contexts such as Asian countries, hence resulting in a TBLT rejection.

### Method

#### Design of the study

Based on the above-stated objectives, the present study employed a quantitative method, with pre- and post-evaluation research design, to investigate the performance of two groups of sophomore students as participants in news-story writing, i.e. an experimental group and a control group.

#### Participants

The population of the study were two classes of Iranian sophomore students majoring in translation at BA degree, IAUH. The reason behind choosing only two classes was their availability as the researchers did not have any chance to access any more classes on a randomized basis. As such, the selected groups included both male and female participants who had passed at least one year of their academic education and received courses on general English. Accordingly, the participants in the experimental group and the control group were 43 and 35,



respectively. The participants' age in both groups ranged from 19 to 24 years, and their native language was Persian.

### **Instrumentation**

In order to collect the needed data for analysis, an initial proficiency test extracted from the Oxford Quick Placement Test and a news story writing exam designed and prepared on the basis of a TBLT framework, were used as the measuring instruments. Thus, to make sure that the selected participants were homogeneous enough for being placed in the two study groups, the QOPT proficiency test was administrated as an add-on guarantee. Also, with the aim of investigating about the participants' ability of writing news stories before and after the intervention, an evaluation exam administered. This researcher-made evaluation exam which was prepared on the basis of a selected passage initially provided as an authentic piece of news within a macro-discourse of news story texts, was put to the test of expert judgment by several referees with the aim of developing its validity. The exam contained two parts, a headline section to be written (64 characters at most) and a news story section (100 words).

In scoring the pre- and post-evaluation exams, to provide a rather objective assessment of written output by each participant, two raters, one majoring in translation studies and the other in TEFL, did score the students' news story writing products on the basis of an analytic rubric prepared in advance; a scoring procedure which was enhanced by measuring the intra-rater and the inter-rater reliabilities at just to make sure of the consistency of the data obtained.

### **Procedures**

To conduct the study, after selecting appropriate participants and dividing them to two groups, the pre-test on news story writing was administered to both groups to measure their initial writing ability. Then, the experimental group, i.e. the TB group, was exposed to a six-week TB-based intervention that was to be followed by the post-treatment exam on news story writing. The control group too (the conventional group) received theoretical stuff of an abstracted nature merely, again to be followed by the post-treatment exam on news story writing. The TB-based intervention sessions for the experimental group were generally organized in such a way that the three-stage model in task implementation, that is, the initial 'pre-task', i.e. an introduction to the topic and task, the in-between 'task cycle', i.e. task planning, doing the task, preparing to report on the task and presenting the task report, and the final language-focused 'post-task' analysis and practice, i.e. focus on form, could be presented. To ensure the learners' active involvement with the task and guarantee a learner-centered setting, the researcher-teacher only observed and provided consultations, if necessary.

The exam sections and their size were based upon *Reuters Handbook of Journalism* (2020). As such, the total score mounted to 20 points, itself summed up by positive and negative points due to use and misuse of the textual and contextual features and sub-skills related to news-story writing, i.e. the subskill components of 5Ws and 1H words, given words, spelling and punctuation, context, consistency, structure, simple language, text length, and headline.

### **Results and Discussion**

To answer the first and second research questions of the study, both descriptive statistics, i.e. mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistics, i.e. independent-samples t-test, one-way ANCOVA and non-parametric Mann-Whitney were applied. Parametric and non-parametric tests were simultaneously used to make sure about the validity of the findings, since the requisite

assumptions in some cases were met and, in a few others, not. Before carrying out the study, in order to explore the effects of the treatment on the participants in both groups, it was needed to make that the participants were homogeneous with regard to their general English proficiency. Thus, the administration of QOPT provided an additional guarantee. The results of QOPT test are presented in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Homogeneity of Participants*

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
English Proficiency	98	39.57	7.39	20.00	59.00

The sophomores' mean score and standard deviation were found to be 39.57 and 7.39, respectively. That is, those whose scores were between 32.18 (M-1SD) and 46.96 (M+1SD) were chosen as the homogeneous sample (N = 78), who were then assigned to TB (N=43) and CT (N=35) groups based on the classroom (in the university) to which they belonged.

Making sure the results of the intra-rater reliability was positively agreed, the inter-rater reliability coefficient for total score of overall performance 0.84 proceeded by 1.00, 1.00, 1.00, 0.62, 0.77, 0.73, 0.68, 1.00, 1.00 for the subskill components of 5Ws and 1H data, choice of vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, context, consistency, structure, simple language, text length, and headline, respectively; hence, strong agreement in rating. The Pearson Correlation, based on average ratings of scores for the nine sub-skill components, was applied to measure the intra- and inter-rater reliability of the writing task outputs.

As stated above, both parametric and non-parametric tests were run to make sure about the validity of the findings. As such, the independent variable (i.e. treatment) consisted of two categorical independent groups: TB group and conventional group. There was independence of observations; that is, there was no relationship between the observations in each group or between groups. Comparing the effect of the task-based instruction and the conventional teaching on the subjects' overall ability of news story writing and its nine subcomponents at pre- and post-task evaluation stages, the following results were obtained (Table 2):

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics for both groups' performances: The sub-skill components of news-story writing and overall performance at pre- and post-task evaluation stages*

No	Skill	Test	Group	M	SD	N
1	WH Words	Pretest	TB	1.20	.35	33
			CT	1.07	.43	33
		Posttest	TB	1.23	.17	33
			CT	1.04	.37	33
2	Given Words	Pretest	TB	.84	.46	36
			CT	.90	.40	33
		Posttest	TB	.72	.50	36
			CT	.81	.45	33
3	Spelling and Punctuation	Pretest	TB	.61	.57	36
			CT	.53	.41	33

		Posttest	TB	.77	.54	36
			CT	.68	.52	33
4	Context	Pretest	TB	.87	.65	29
			CT	.87	.77	33
		Posttest	TB	1.08	.38	29
			CT	.76	.69	33
5	Consistency	Pretest	TB	.74	.59	32
			CT	.62	.69	31
		Posttest	TB	.39	.32	32
			CT	.64	.68	31
6	Structure, Language, Context and Color	Pretest	TB	.59	.49	34
			CT	.65	.70	32
		Posttest	TB	.47	.39	34
			CT	.55	.63	32
7	Simple Language	Pretest	TB	.43	.37	31
			CT	.15	.18	21
		Posttest	TB	.44	.30	31
			CT	.27	.23	21
8	Length	Pretest	TB	.25	.11	36
			CT	.24	.14	33
		Posttest	TB	.25	.11	36
			CT	.21	.14	33
9	Headline	Pretest	TB	.25	.19	36
			CT	.19	.18	33
		Posttest	TB	.25	.17	36
			CT	.25	.18	33
10	Overall Performance	Pretest	TB	5.72	2.50	31
			CT	5.77	3.34	33

It was found that (1) *WH Words* score in TB Group was statistically higher than CT Group ( $F = 5.10, p = .05; U = 385, p = .03$ ), and (4) *Context* score in TB Group was statistically significantly higher than CT Group ( $F = 5.10, p = .00; U = 323, p = .02$ ). With regard to *Consistency* and *Simple Language* sub-skills, the parametric and non-parametric tests do not go hand in hand. Since some critical assumptions have been violated in case of *Consistency* score, we based our conclusions on non-parametric procedure; therefore, there was no significant difference between TB Group and CT Group in terms of *Consistency* score ( $U = 434, p = .39$ ). As most assumptions have been met in case of *Simple Language* score, we based our conclusions on parametric procedure and it was found that there was no significant difference between TB Group and CT Group in terms of *Simple Language* score. In the same vein, based on both parametric and non-parametric results which were found to be in line with each other, the results revealed that there were no significant differences between TB Group and CT Group with respect to all the remaining sub-skills as well as the overall score of news story writing.

**Table 3**

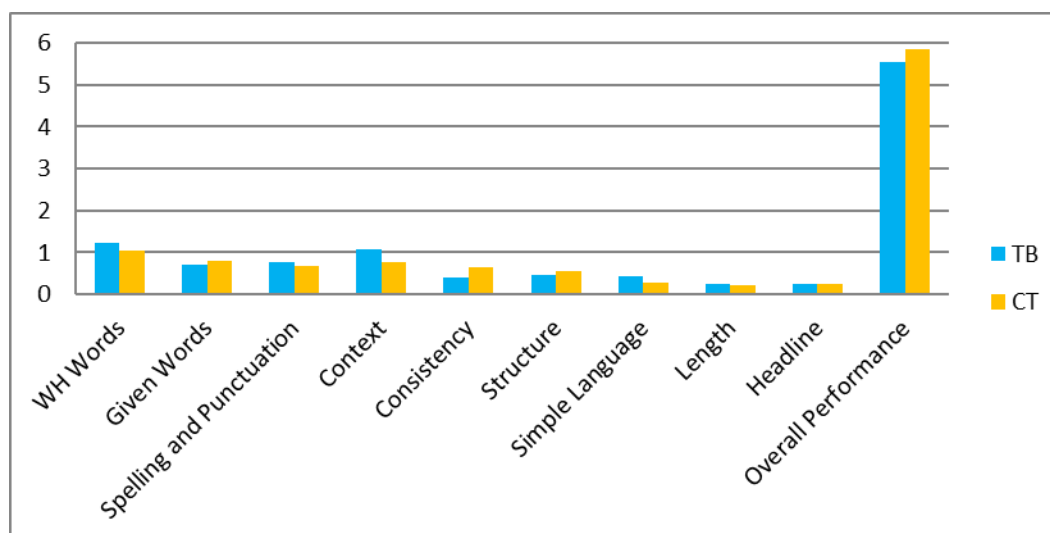
*One-way ANCOVA and Mann-Whitney on the differences between both group's performances*

No	Skills	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.
1	WH Words	.40	1	.40	5.10	.02	385.00	.03
2	Given Words	.08	1	.08	.41	.52	529.00	.42
3	Spelling and Punctuation	.12	1	.12	.42	.51	531.00	.44
4	Context	1.54	1	1.54	8.74	.00	323.50	.02
5	Consistency	1.55	1	1.55	9.88	.00	434.50	.39*
6	Structure	.03	1	.03	.22	.64	520.50	.76
7	Simple Language	.19	1	.19	2.56	.11*	213.50	.03
8	Length	.03	1	.03	2.12	.14	499.00	.13
9	Headline	.00	1	.00	.23	.62	594.00	1.00
10	Overall Performance	1.11	1	1.11	.44	.50	494.00	.81

As it can be seen, the non-significant difference between the TB group's overall performance on news-story writing and its sub-skills, as compared with that of the CT group after the experimental intervention, can be more expressively delineated in the following graphic representation (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*TB and CT posttest overall performances on news-story writing and its sub-skill Discussion*



The main objective pursued in this study was to find out if the task-based instruction and the conventional teaching of news-story writing could lead to any possible differences in the news-story writing ability of the participants, i.e. two groups of Iranian university sophomore

students majoring in translation at BA level. To this purpose, the two groups under study were exposed to a six-week period of intervention in between the pre- and post-evaluation exams on news story writing administered at the pre- and post-experiment stages. The news-story writing output of both groups at the pre- and post-experiment stages were evaluated, and the results of the intra-rater and inter-rater reliability of the scores showed significant agreement.

Upon analyzing the results, it was observed that the implementation of the TB teaching scenario as compared with the CT has not significantly affected the overall news-story writing ability of the participants under study. However, it was found that Wh. words in TB group were significantly higher than those of CT group ( $F= 5.10, p=0.5; U=385, p=0.03$ ), and context score in TB group was significantly higher than CT group ( $F= 5.10, p = .00; U = 323, p = .02$ ). With regard to *Consistency* and *Simple Language* sub-skills, the parametric and non-parametric tests do not go hand in hand. Since some critical assumptions have been violated in case of *Consistency* score, conclusions were based on non-parametric procedure; therefore, there was no significant difference between TB Group and CT Group in terms of *Consistency* score ( $U = 434, p = .39$ ). As most assumptions have been met in case of *Simple Language* score, we based our conclusions on parametric procedure, and so it was found that there was no significant difference between TB Group and CT Group in terms of *Simple Language* score. In the same vein, based on both parametric and non-parametric results, which were found to be in line with each other, the results revealed that there were no significant differences between TB Group and CT Group with respect to all the remaining sub-skills as well as the overall score of news story writing.

### Conclusion

As attested by the results of the study, the participants in the Conventional Teaching (CT) and Task-based (TB) groups more or less did the same performance; in other words, the difference between their performances was not that significant though the TB group appeared to have outperformed the CT group. Accordingly, the findings of the present study, though conducted in a limited scale within classroom setting, substantiate the fact that there were no significant differences between TB group and CT group with respect to the overall score of news-story writing as well as all the sub-skills of choice of words, spelling and punctuation, consistency, structure, simple language, length and headline except for two subskills of use of Wh. words and context balance. Thus, it can be concluded that task-based practice cannot promote the writing skill of EFL students significantly, more than conventional teaching, particularly where the course plan targets a more specific subfield of writing, here news-story writing. As such, the findings of the present study appear to be in parallel with some researchers' studies (Ellis, 2018; Richards and Rodgers, 2014; Littlewood, 2014; Shehadeh, 2012; Carless, 2012; Butler, 2011; Watson-Tod, 2006) in support of TBLT inappropriateness in Asian countries like Iran where educational context is associated with some practical problems for TBLT implementation. Hence, this program is not effective enough in such contexts and as Ellis claims (2018), may need to be modified on the basis of the local and traditional specifications of the educational context in the target community to be able to develop the learners' news-story writing skill to the expected level.

The findings of the present study can have instructional implications for the EFL policy makers and course planners in favor of modifying TBLT within the educational programs of teaching writing skill in Eastern countries including Iran, to make students benefit more from blending conventional teaching and task-based language teaching in an active learning situation,



thereby prompting the absorption of sub-skill components needed to enhance news-story writing skill.

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