

THE EFFECT OF TASK-BASED EXTENSIVE READING ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' WRITING ACCURACY

Touran Ahour, Maryam Zarei

Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran
E-Mails: ahour@iaut.ac.ir, torahour2@yahoo.com, zareimaryam@gmail.com

Abstract. *This study examined the effectiveness of task-based extensive reading on writing accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. It was conducted with 36 upper-intermediate students comprising two experimental groups and one control group in two language institutes in Tabriz. The experimental groups were assigned to read graded readers extensively out of the classroom and complete after-reading tasks: Group 1 had Extensive Reading with Written Summary Task, whereas Group 2 had Extensive Reading with Oral Summary Task. Control group did not receive such treatments, and was just engaged in the regular class program. The results of one way ANOVA and post hoc test indicated that experimental groups performed better than the control group on the post-test. Significant differences were found between the control group and experimental Group 1 and the experimental Group 2 and control group.*

Key words: *extensive reading, task, task-based extensive reading, writing accuracy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading involves several intricate skills that must be met so as to make the reader successful. For instance, skillful readers identify the purpose of reading, manage the reading with the purpose in mind, use tactics that were effective to them in the past when reading similar texts for similar purposes, and check their understanding of the text in light of the purpose for reading (Zainal and Husin 2011). Moreover, Ur (1998) noted that if there is a task for the learner to perform, s/he feels more motivated, and the reading itself becomes more purposeful. According to Nunan (1989), task is a communicative activity which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally on meaning.

As Applebee (1984) argued, writing is the externalization and remarking of thinking and to count writing as detached from the intentions and viewpoints of the writer is not to address composition as a reflective device for meaning making. A major challenge, according to Yaghoubi-Notash (2015), faced by foreign language learners is to produce good-quality writing. Language learners, especially at higher levels of proficiency, are burdened by demanding, time-consuming writing tasks for general as well as academic purposes. This is partly due to the fact that writing is an outgrowth of perhaps a long-term stock-taking in terms of other language skill areas such as reading, vocabulary, grammar, and so on (Yaghoubi-Notash 2015).

Hamadouche (2010) mentioned that some criteria in different aspects of writing including content, organization, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and accuracy are essential for writing and these criteria make the writing task a difficult one. According to Richards, Platt, and Platt, "writing accuracy refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but may not include the ability to write fluently" (1992:142). Larsen-Freeman (2003) also asserted that grammatical accuracy, in writing, is required to ensure the writer's intended message and to avoid communicative misunderstanding.

Tsai (2006) stressed the importance of linking writing and reading in college EFL courses. He stated that teachers of English as a foreign or second language have managed to teach writing and reading independently from each other. Nevertheless, writing and reading share similar features and learners are more likely to benefit from the teaching program that makes writing and reading activities go hand-in-hand in such a way that complete each other. Implementing this concept in real teaching conditions would not be a problematic challenge when EFL writing teachers consider students' needs, are conscious of the advantages of the reading-writing connection, and wisely devise teaching practices (Tsai 2006). Besides, Hedgcock and Ferris (2009), supporting extensive reading (ER) programs, suggested that having the types of background knowledge through these types of reading programs is not only helpful to L2 production but indispensable to it. Extensive reading generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read (Carrel and Carson 1997). Bell (1998) stressed that reading extensively offers teacher engagement in a concentrated and encouraging reading program to direct students along a passage to be independent and resourceful in their reading and language learning, and furthermore to be well-improved and naturally-responsive to form texts, thoughts and ideas in writing.

Since writing is an important but at the same time difficult skill in learning a new language, ample research has been conducted to help students improve this ability. Shahan and Lomax (1986) suggested three models explaining the writing-reading relationship. Their models contained the interaction of writing and reading, reading-to-write, and writing-to-read. They used path analysis to investigate the impact of reading on writing. The results showed that the reading-to-write was superior to the other two models.

Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014) assigned students into experimental and control groups in order to assess the effect of the extensive reading program on the writing performance of the Saudi EFL university students. Results indicated that the extensive reading program had a significant positive effect on learners' writing performance. Salehi, Asgari and Amini (2015) investigated the impact of extensive reading on the writing performance of Iranian EFL pre-university students. The achievement of the experimental group, measured by the difference between the pre-test and the post-test, was meaningfully better than that of the control group. This indicated that the extensive reading significantly improved EFL learners' writing performance.

Smith (2003) in his study on elementary school children found out that when children read more narrative texts such as short stories, fiction books, and poems, they raise their concern over structure and function of expository texts. He also claimed that topical bibliography and commentary could incorporate expository texts into school curriculum, which are considered a rewarding experience and a primary function for students to enhance their expository writing. Shen (2009) surveyed the effects of a reading-writing linking project on the freshmen EFL college students who studied English as an obligatory subject. The results of the study showed that the learners' mastery developed not only in critical thinking but also in linguistic progress as well as in personal growth.

Chuenchaichon (2011) investigated the development of paragraph writing skills in EFL writers through the use of a reading-into-writing method. The study results showed that the reading-into-writing method had a positive impact on the paragraph level writing development of these learners. The students of the experimental group tended to use more compound sentences and more complex sentences in their writing. This might be attributed to the fact that they had more chance of reading texts containing compound and complex sentences.

Lee and Hsu (2009) examined the impact of ER on less successful students' writing in a Taiwanese university. In the measurement of their writing, five subscales were included: content, vocabulary organization, mechanics and language use. The same numbers of writing assignments were done by all of the students in a writing class. The results indicated that reading has a strong effect on writing and fluency. Having a longer duration was essential in having better results and this study confirmed that the longer the period of ER program, the better the writing development.

Although a multitude of studies have been undertaken to investigate the impact of extensive reading on different language skills (writing, speaking, etc.) and subskills (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) as noted above, the influence of task-based extensive reading on writing performance of EFL learners is an under-researched area. Accordingly, this study was planned to connect some types of language tasks to extensive reading programs in order to investigate their influences on writing accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, the following research question was posed: Does task-based extensive reading have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy?

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Three classes from two private language institutes in Tabriz, one of the largest cities in Iran, participated in this study. The participants were 36 female students at upper intermediate level. Their age ranged from 17 to 25 and their native language was Turkish Azari. They belonged to three classes whose homogeneity was considered with a pre-test by the researchers. Then, they were randomly assigned into 2 experimental groups and 1 control group, each with 12 students.

2.2. Instruments

Since the researchers decided to measure students' accuracy in narrative writing, they asked the students to use the graded readers in levels 4 or 5 for out of class extensive reading program. An appropriate text, as Eskey (2005) suggested, needs to be slightly difficult for the learners' reading ability. In other words, it should meet Krashen's *i+1* standard for comprehensibility. The graded readers written in stages satisfy this requirement. According to Coady (1997), the graded readers are useful for English language learners because they provide learners with repeated exposure to vocabulary and syntactic structures.

The researchers for both the pre- and post- test chose narrative writing to be in harmony with the type of extensive reading materials (i.e., story books) used by the experimental groups. The participants, in both pre-test and post-test, received four different writing

topics from which they were supposed to choose one and write about it. Topics were selected from *Writing Power* (White 2003). The topics for the pre-test were:

1. A special gift I gave or received
2. A difficult decision I had to make
3. A favorite childhood memory
4. A mistake that taught me an important lesson

And the post-test topics were:

1. The best celebration you have ever had
2. Your first day in school or college
3. Falling in love and marriage
4. A day that you will never forget

2.3. Procedure

Before starting the main study, the researchers conducted a pre-test, which was a narrative writing, for three classes in order to get the initial scores for the students' writing accuracy. Participants were supposed to write at least three paragraphs, each containing at most 10 clauses. These papers were corrected by two scorers in order to increase the reliability of the scoring. The inter-rater reliability was calculated through Pearson Product-Moment correlation and an acceptable reliability ($r=.761$) was obtained. The results of ANOVA for the pre-test indicated that the three classes were homogeneous regarding writing accuracy.

After ensuring that there was not any significant difference between the classes, we randomly assigned them into three groups, two experimental groups and one control group. Prior to giving treatment to experimental groups, the basic objectives of the program were explicitly told to the students. The researchers decided to deal with the issue directly and provide them with a comprehensive introduction. They were informed of the benefits of extensive reading and how an extensive reading program works.

The treatment for the experimental groups started by assigning each of the participants in experimental groups to finish a story book which was a graded reader in levels 4 or 5 outside of the class every week. By the end of a two-month semester, they were supposed to finish eight story books. The treatment for the experimental groups differed in the type of task that they had to complete after reading stories. That is, one experimental group (Group 1) was asked to present the written summary including the general idea of the story to the teacher every session. Whereas, the other experimental group (Group 2) was required to present an oral summary of the story, and comment on the story's organization and characters of the story orally to the class every session. Hence, group 1 had Extensive Reading with Written Summary Task, whereas group 2 had Extensive Reading with Oral Summary Task. Experimental groups went through all the above mentioned steps twice a week. One third of the class time was allocated to their presentations with regard to these programs and the rest to the usual class programs.

While the experimental groups were having the opportunity to read more texts (stories) for pleasure and general idea and complete after-reading tasks, the control group (Group 3) was engaged in the regular class program. In the last session, a post-test in the form of narrative writing was administered to investigate the effectiveness of task-based extensive reading training on writing accuracy. The students were given 60 minutes to write about one of the given topics which they favored. The papers were scored by two raters to obtain the inter-rater reliability. The reliability of the scoring was met through inter-rater reliability as ($r=.806$). The

average of the scores of two raters was considered in the statistical analyses. Writings were corrected for accuracy using the ratio of error-free clauses per total clauses (EFC/C). Following Frear and Chiu (2015) and Wiggleworth (2008), who reported that EFC/C is the most precise measure of writing accuracy that we currently have, we applied that formula in our study as well. All errors related to spelling and punctuation were excluded.

2.4. Data analysis

To obtain and compare the mean scores of the three groups, the researchers applied descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (ANOVA). Moreover, to have a detailed comparison between the groups, we employed a post hoc test.

3. RESULTS

To determine the homogeneity of the participants regarding their writing accuracy on the pre-test, the researchers conducted a one-way ANOVA. Table 1 represents the results.

Table1 Results of ANOVA for mean comparison of the three groups on the pre-test

Groups	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Group 1	14.41	1.56			
Group 2	15.15	1.08			
Group 3	13.87	1.75			
Between groups			2	2.223	.124

Note. Group 1=Extensive Reading with Written Summary Task,
Group 2= Extensive Reading with Oral Summary Task, Group 3=control

Table 1 shows that the difference between the groups on the pre-test is not statistically significant ($F(2, 33) = 2.223, p = .124$). Thus, as there was no statistically significant difference between the groups on the pre-test, the three groups were assumed equivalent.

To answer the research question - Does task-based extensive reading have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy?, the researchers calculated descriptive statistics and ran a one-way ANOVA for the three groups of the study. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Results of ANOVA for mean comparison of the three groups on the post-test

Groups	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Group 1	18.16	1.58			
Group 2	19.29	1.11			
Group 3	14.04	2.27			
Between groups			2	5.108	.012

Note. Group 1=Extensive Reading with Written Summary Task,
Group 2= Extensive Reading with Oral Summary Task, Group 3=control

Results of one-way ANOVA indicated there were significant differences between the groups on the post-test, ($F(2, 33) = 5.108, p = .012$). As Table 2 indicates, Group 1 ($M=18.16, SD= 1.58$) and Group 2 ($M=19.29, SD= 1.11$) outperformed the control group

($M=14.04$, $SD=2.27$). In order to find which group's mean was significantly higher than the others, Tukey's Post Hoc test was carried out (see Table 3).

Table 3 Results of Post hoc for comparison of the groups

	Mean difference	Standard error	P
Group 1- Group 2	1.13	.619	.261
Group 2- Group 3	5.25	.126	.008
Group 3- Group 1	4.12	.653	.015

Note. Group 1=Extensive Reading with Written Summary Task,
Group 2= Extensive Reading with Oral Summary Task, Group 3=control

The Tukey post hoc test, as Table 3 shows, revealed no significant differences between the two treatment groups ($p = .261$). However, significant differences were found between the control group and experimental Group 1 ($p=.015$, $p<.005$) and the experimental Group 2 and control group ($p=.008$, $p<.005$).

4. DISSCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study set out to investigate the impact of two types of tasks in an extensive reading program on the writing accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental groups and the control group on the posttest in favor of the experimental groups. Comparing the experimental groups, the second group outperformed the first group. That is, the effect of presenting the extensive reading materials (stories) orally and commenting on their organization was better than that of just providing their written summary. However, their mean difference was not too significant. The significant differences were found between treatment Group 2 and Group 3 and Group 3 and treatment Group 1.

The results obtained from the study revealed that the treatment which is task-based extensive reading training can work in Iranian EFL contexts. A possible reason for this might be that the learners had more chance of reading and working with texts of various structures and word forms. Moreover, extensive reading followed by doing tasks could have increased EFL learners' confidence and motivation for language learning in general and for improvement of writing accuracy in particular.

Using extensive reading as a method of developing writing ability is a notion for which numerous researchers have found optimistic results (e.g., Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman 2014, Chuenchaichon 2011, Lee and Hsu 2009, Salehi, Asgari and Amini 2015, Smith 2003). Each of these studies considered the effectiveness of extensive reading on writing performance of students in different proficiency levels but did not combine their programs with task-based performance. Results showed that extensive reading had a significant positive effect on learners' writing performance.

It is hoped that the results of this study which has taken into consideration both tasks and extensive reading have benefits for students and teachers, as well as curriculum designers. It emphasizes the need for time management programs along with a well-structured curriculum in order to teach reading courses extensively to students. The findings may open the mind of the students towards the importance of task-based extensive reading in their writing performance. Besides, teachers can better understand the issue and integrate it into their classroom routine in general and in the writing class in particular.

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