

The Effect of Task-Based Approach on the Iranian Advanced EFL Learners' Narrative vs. Expository Writing

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to determine the effect of task-based approach vs. traditional approach on the narrative and expository writing of the Iranian EFL learners. There were two control groups as well as two experimental ones in the current study. In the two control groups namely G1 and G2 narrative and expository writing were taught respectively using the traditional approach.

Whereas, in the two experimental groups, namely G3 and G4 narrative and expository writing were taught respectively on the basis of task-based approach.

After the treatment, a narrative writing post-test was given to the two narrative groups (G1 and G3) and an expository writing post-test was given to the two expository groups (G2 and G4). Data analysis showed that experimental groups outperformed control groups. So it was concluded that task-based approach was more effective in teaching

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narrative and expository writing compared to the traditional approach. It was also found that although there was a difference between the narrative and expository experimental groups (G3 and G4) in favor of the narrative group, this difference was not statistically significant.

Key terms: Task, Task-Based Language Teaching, Writing Mode, Narrative Writing, Expository Writing

1. Introduction

We live in the era of information and communication and thus we need to share our new ideas and findings with the people all over the world. Being an internationally recognized language, most publications as well as website materials use English as their means of communication. In Iran, like in many other countries, there's a strong tendency toward learning/developing writing ability in a foreign language, namely English. As far as the modes of writing are concerned, narration and exposition are two highly validated and frequently used writing modes.

In spite of all of the developments in the teaching of writing in different EFL contexts, the traditional approach, i.e. "product approach" is still used in teaching writing to learners in Iranian universities and colleges. Also, the quality of research on writing in general and the research on the teaching of writing in particular is very poor in Iran. The situation is even worse when the teaching of writing modes like narration and exposition are concerned.

Therefore, because of the poor status of EFL writing in Iran due to the use of traditional, product-based approaches, the current study attempted

to use Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a rather new and validated approach in the teaching of writing modes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-based approach is a revolution in ELT in the late 20th century which has been developed based on the concept of tasks. Nowadays, the concept of task and task-based methodology is the common orthodoxy in the field of language teaching and it's becoming more and more important in ELT.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) assert that “task-based language teaching refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core units of planning and instruction in language teaching” (p.223).

According to Leaver and Willis (2004) “task-based language teaching (TBLT) helps language learners make real efforts to communicate as best as they can in the foreign language which they are learning” (p.2). Willis (2004) contends that task-based instruction (TBI) is in fact a meaning-focused approach that reflects real world language use for purposeful communication. In TBLT, all the four language skills are considered as important.

With regard to the theory of language, Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that TBLT draws on functional, interactional and in some cases structural theories about the nature of language. TBLT uses a task-based syllabus which is one of the types of analytical syllabi. Some psychologically-oriented researches and theories support TBLT. Krashen's input

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hypothesis, interaction hypothesis, output hypothesis and Vygotsky's theory are some of the theories that strongly support TBL.

Both Willis (1996) and Ellis (2003) suggest that all of the classroom instructions in TBLT can be organized in terms of pre-task, during task and post-task phases. The overall purpose of the pre-task is to prepare the learners for completing the task through providing them with the task instruction and activating the background knowledge. During task phase, learners complete the task. In the post-task phase, learners practice some specific linguistic features of the task. Therefore, this phase is also called the "language focus phase" (Willis and Willis, 2001, p.178).

2.2. Modes of Writing

In recent years a lot of research has been done on the concept of "genre" and its role in writing. Genre studies have focused on the recognizable patterns and norms of organization and structure of written texts. One branch of genre studies addresses the general types or modes of writing.

According to Stifler (2002) "modes of writing or rhetorical modes are patterns of organization aimed at achieving a particular effect in the reader" (p.1). Generally modes of writing have been classified into four types; descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative (Connor, 1996; Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

2.2.1. Narrative Writing

The most familiar and simplest mode of writing is narration. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.337) define this writing mode as “narrative writing reports an event or tells the story of something that happened”. The purpose of a narrative text is to inform, entertain and excite the readers (Dickson, Kameenui and Simmons, 2007, p.11). “Narrative text depicts events, actions, emotions, or situations the people in a culture experience” (Graesser, Golding and Long, 1991, mentioned in Dickson et al., 2007). But the most comprehensive definition is the one presented by Jewell (2004):

“narration” or a “narrative” provides details of what happened. It is almost like a list of events in the order that they happened, except that it is written in paragraph form. A narration or narrative doesn’t have to show any cause and effect; it only needs to show what happened in the order that it happened (p.4).

2.2.2. Expository Writing

The purpose of this mode of writing is to provide information about a particular subject and to explain it. Text books, essays and many of the articles published in magazines are expository texts which communicate information (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). The structure of this mode is more complex than other modes. Consequently, ESL/EFL learners have more problems in learning to write expository texts. Expository mode has various subdivisions. Common expository text structures include compare/contrast, classification, illustration, procedural description,

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sequence, enumeration or collection and problem-solution” (Meyer and Ric, 1998; Weaver and Kintsch, 1991, cited in Dickson et al., 2007).

In the Iranian EFL context, despite new methods and approaches which have been successful in other EFL contexts all over the world, most of the techniques used to teach writing modes nowadays are still traditional, i.e. the teacher focuses on the end product and doesn't lead the students through the process of generating ideas, organizing them into a coherent sequence, and putting them on paper. In such a traditional approach, students receive feedback on the final product they have submitted to the teacher for correction and for getting marks. And the normal class instruction is in effect, the evaluation of the product. It can be said that most of the current instruction of the narrative and expository essays is in the form of the rhetorical analysis and formal aspects. The purpose of this study, as such, was to investigate the virtual use of task-based approach in teaching writing in general and teaching narrative and expository writing to the Iranian EFL learners in the advanced writing courses in particular. In so doing, the current study tries to answer the following questions:

Q1: does teaching writing through task-based approach have any significant effect on the Iranian advanced EFL learners' writing skill?

Q2: is there any significant difference between the narratives vs. expository writings of the Iranian advanced EFL learners who are taught writing through task-based approach?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 173 Iranian junior and senior EFL learners studying English Language Translation at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan took part in this study. In order to have four homogeneous groups regarding the general English language proficiency, a TOEFL test was administered at the outset.

Based on their scores on the TOEFL test, 140 subjects were selected.

Then, a writing pre-test was given to them and finally 120 students were chosen. Then, the selected students were assigned randomly to four groups of 30, namely two control groups and two experimental groups. The age range of the participants varied between 19 and 25. The four groups included both male and female students.

3.2. Instrumentation

This section elaborates on the instruments used in this research. These instruments used were: a TOEFL test, a writing pre-test, a narrative writing post-test, an expository writing post-test and Jacobs, Fay Hartflel, Hughey, and Wormuth's Profile (1981): ESL Composition Profile.

1. The TOEFL pre-test (section 2 and section 3)

In order to achieve maximum possible homogeneity among the subjects regarding their general English proficiency, a TOEFL test was administered at the beginning of the study. Because of the difficulty of administering the complete test battery and lack of enough audio

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facilities, the listening comprehension section was not included. Also the TWE essay section was excluded because of the difficulty of scoring due to lack of experienced and certified TOEFL scorers. Accordingly, the administered TOEFL test included only structure and written expression section (40 items) and the reading comprehension section (50 items).

2. The writing pre-test

After the subjects were homogenized based on their marks on the TOEFL test, they were asked to write a composition of about 200 words about a given topic by the researcher. The purpose of the writing pre-test was to determine whether the subjects were homogeneous concerning their writing ability.

3. Jacobs', et. al. Profile (1981): ESL Composition Profile

The students' compositions on the pre-test and on the two posttests were all scored by two raters; the researcher himself and a colleague, using the above-mentioned profile for ESL composition scoring. This profile is a 100-point scale and uses five sets of criteria in scoring a composition: content criteria, organization criteria, vocabulary criteria, language use criteria and mechanics criteria. Each set of criteria changes a four level subjective judgment scale into interval scores. This profile is one of the most commonly used and dependable profiles for ESL composition rating since it has been developed in 1981. It considers all the different aspects of the composition and it is a successful scale based on both the holistic and analytical approaches for writing evaluation.

4. The narrative writing post-test (Appendix A)

The purpose of this post-test was to compare the performance of G1 and G3 after the treatment. The topic for the posttest was chosen by the researcher himself after considering the cognitive and linguistic difficulty of the topics and after examining the topics closely from different aspects.

5. The expository writing post-test (Appendix B)

This expository post-test required the students to write expository essays of about 250 words based on a specific topic. The purpose of this post-test was to compare the performance of G2 and G4 after the treatment was given.

3.3. Procedures

The students in the two control groups (G1 and G2) were taught by a colleague who is an English language teacher at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan. In the first control group (G1), narrative writing was taught but in the second control group, i.e. G2, expository writing was traditionally taught to the learners. The instructor taught writing quite traditionally, that is, he introduced and defined the type of the essay and then analyzed its rhetorical structure and organizational pattern. After that, he gave a sample essay to the learners, and the conjunction words, cohesive markers and the importance of the thesis statement were discussed. And finally, the students were required to write essays for the next session. The essays written by the students were scored by the teacher, mainly considering their grammar, word choice and rhetorical patterns. There was no cooperation or

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collaboration between the learners in the two classes and the teacher was the main authority in the class. There was no peer feedback or peer correction in the two classes. In fact, in these two classes the focus of instruction was on the end product, that is, the essays which were written by the students. Accordingly, grammar, rhetorical structure, vocabulary and mechanics of writing like punctuation and spelling were emphasized by the teacher. The students had to take notes from the teacher's lecture they thought they were important for writing narrative and expository essays.

The instructor didn't use any specific course book in these two classes.

The researcher himself taught narrative writing in one of the experimental groups (G3) and expository writing in the other experimental group (G4). The class time was divided to three phases: pre-task, task cycle and post-task. During the pre-task phase, the topic was introduced and the instructor encouraged the students to activate the related schemata and the background knowledge. Here the focus was on brainstorming ideas and free writing about the introduced task without concern for form. At this phase scripts, charts, maps, films and the like were used. The task cycle had three stages: task, planning and report. During the task stage, the students were asked to organize their ideas and write about the presented task. The students worked in pairs or in groups of five or six based on the difficulty of the task at hand. The instructor walked around monitoring and helping students to formulate what they wanted to say but he did not intervene to correct errors of form. During the planning stage students were asked to rewrite and draft their writing. Also, peer feedback and the use of dictionary

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were encouraged during the writing phase. In the report stage, one or two groups were asked to read their essays in class for comments. During the post-task phase, the structure and organization of the narrative and expository essays were fully discussed and there was some practice on the cohesive devices, grammar, content, fluency of ideas and word selection. In fact, this phase was “a language focus” phase or “a focus on form” stage.

This procedure was practiced for 10 weeks. The duration of each session was about 1 hour and 45 minutes. After 10 sessions of giving treatment, a narrative post-test writing was given to the two narrative groups (G1 and G3) and an expository post-test writing was given to the two expository groups (G2 and G4).

3.4. Design

There were two control groups (G1 and G2) and two experimental groups (G3 and G4) in the study and the students were randomly selected and assigned to the four groups after screening them through a TOEFL test and a writing pre-test. Also, the assignment of the narrative and experimental groups was done randomly. Furthermore, the current study used a writing pre-test before the treatment in order to assess and control for the differences between groups prior to the start of the experiment. Finally, two post-tests were used at the end of the study; one for the two narrative groups (G1 and G3) and one for the two expository groups (G2 and G4).

Therefore the design of this study has the characteristics of a quasi-experimental project based on what Hatch and Lazaraton (1991, pp.95-98)

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have considered as the main features of a quasi-experimental study. So the current research uses a Quasi-Experimental: Pre-test Post-test Control Group Design. The schematic presentation of the design used in this study is as follows:

G1 (random) -x1- o -x2
G2 (random) -x1- o -x3

G3 (random) -x1- T -x2
G4 (random) -x1- T -x3

4. Results and Discussions

A total of 173 Iranian EFL students majoring English Language Translation at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan took part in this study. These learners were given a TOEFL test (See Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the TOEFL test

N	Mean	SD	min	max
173	34	10.21	58	88

Then 140 students were selected based on their scores on the TOEFL test. As the researcher needed four equal groups of 30, he selected the students whose scores were ± 1.5 SD around the mean. Therefore, the researcher selected 140 students who were homogeneous regarding their general proficiency in English. Then, a writing pre-test was given to these 140 selected students to check their homogeneity regarding the writing ability. Later on, all of the papers were rated by two raters, the researcher

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himself and a colleague using Jacobs et. al. profile (1981) for scoring ESL compositions. There were two scores for each learner at the writing pre-test.

Accordingly, after the first 20 compositions were scored, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to see if there is a high degree of go-togetherness between the scores given by two raters. A correlation coefficient of .826 was obtained showing that there was a high positive correlation between the ratings of the two scorers. The descriptive statistics for the writing pre-test is given in the following table.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the writing pre-test

N	Mean	SD	min	max
140	56.80	10.74	30	70

Later, 120 students were selected based on their scores on the writing pre-test. These subjects who had been homogenized with respect to both their General English Proficiency and writing ability were randomly assigned to four groups of 30. The assignment of the narrative and experimental groups was also done randomly. Running a One-Way ANOVA confirmed that all of the four groups were homogeneous regarding their writing ability (Refer to Table 3 below).

Table 3. One way-ANOVA for the writing pre-test

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	38.09	3	12.69	.396	.756
Within Groups	3720.50	116	32.07		
Total	3758.59	119			

4.1. Investigating the First Research Question

After the data were gathered, descriptive statistics for performance of all of the four groups on the pre-test and post-test was provided using the SPSS program. See table 4 below.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for performance of the four groups on pre-test and post-test

Group	Methodology	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
G1	Traditional	30	60.80	5.58	65.11	6.01
G2	Traditional	30	59.96	5.30	63.50	5.85
G3	Task-Based Approach	30	61.42	6.00	70.13	5.72
G4	Task-Based Approach	30	60.23	5.73	68.55	6.41

The following figure shows the mean scores for each group before and after the treatment. It can be seen how each group's writing has improved.

The highest improvement is made by the experimental narrative group (G3) and the least achievement is by the control expository group (G2).

It can also be clearly observed that the two experimental groups (G3 and G4) have done better on the post-test.

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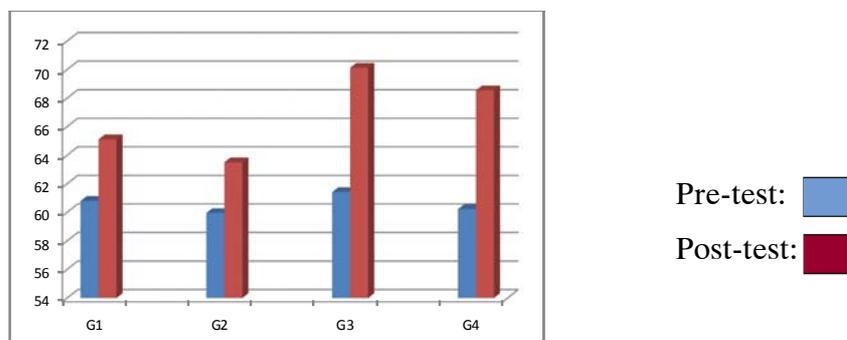


Figure 1. Performance of the four groups on pre-test and post-test

As is seen there is an apparent difference between the performance of all of the groups on the pre-test and post-test. Therefore, a Matched T-test was run four times to determine if any improvement has occurred in the writing of all four groups. The results are given in the following table:

Table 5. The used Matched T-tests

Pair	df	t	Sig
G1 Pretest/Posttest	29	3.68	.000 *
G2 Pretest/Posttest	29	3.18	.000 *
G3 Pretest/Posttest	29	6.35	.000 *
G4 Pretest/Posttest	29	6.11	.000 *

(P < .05*)

The critical value for t with 29 degrees of freedom at .05 level of significance is 2.045. Since the observed value for T for each group is more than the critical value for T ($T_o > 2.045$), it can be concluded that the difference between pre-test scores and post-test scores for each group is significant. It can also be claimed that the traditional approach has been effective in teaching narrative and expository writing to Iranian EFL learners.

In order to answer the first research question the performances of the two control groups on the post-test were compared with the performances of the two experimental groups on the post-test i.e. the performance of G1 was compared with the performance of G3 and the performance of G2 was compared with the performance of G4 using the independent T-test (See Table 6). The observed t value at the .05 level of significance with 58 degrees of freedom for G1-G3 comparison 4.50 and it is 4.21 for G2-G4.

These two values are greater than the critical value for t at this level of significance with 58 degrees of freedom ($t_{\text{critical}} = 2.045$). Therefore, the difference between the performances of the two experimental groups and the performances of the two control groups are statistically significant in favor of the experimental groups.

Table 6. The results of Independent t-tests for posttest

	df	t	Sig(2-tailed)
G1- G3 Posttest	58	4.50	.002 *
G2- G4 Posttest	58	4.21	.002 *
G3- G4 Posttest	58	1.78	.317

($P < .05^*$)

Therefore, it can be claimed that task-based approach has been more effective than the traditional approach in teaching both narrative and expository writing to Iranian advanced EFL learners.

4.2. Investigating the Second Research Question

Descriptive statistics for the performance of G3 and G4 on the post-test (See Table 4) shows that the mean score for G3 is greater than the mean for

G4. An apparent difference between the performances of the two groups on the post-test can be seen. As it is shown in table 6 the independent t-test revealed that such a difference is not statistically significant and there is no significant difference between the two groups. Thus, the experimental narrative group (G3) and experimental expository group (G4) are not different and none of them has outperformed the other on the posttest due to the mode of teaching writing.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Based on the above-mentioned results and the statistical analyses we can conclude that teaching narrative and expository writing through task-based approach is more effective than teaching them through the traditional approach. But as far as the performances of the two experimental groups, that is, the narrative group (G3) and the expository group (G4) are concerned, task-based approach is not biased towards one of the two writing modes and there is not a significant difference between the two groups.

Two questions are posed here; first, why did the writing performance of all the four groups improve irrespective of the adopted approach for teaching writing? Second, why did the task-based classes outperform the traditional classes?

A probable interpretation and answer to the first question based on the gathered data and related analyses is that subjects were not familiar with essay writing at the beginning of the study and they only knew that an essay had an introduction, a conclusion and a body. But they didn't know how an

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introductory paragraph was like and how it was organized. They didn't know how to write thesis statements and where to put them in the introductory paragraphs or what were the different shapes of an introductory paragraph.

They didn't know what the blueprint meant and what its position and relation to the body paragraphs was. Furthermore, they didn't know how to organize body paragraphs and how to get unity and coherence in an essay.

They just were able to write paragraphs and the performance of the subjects on the pre-test essay writing was just their own expansion of the model for paragraph writing they had learned in the previous writing courses. In fact, they had developed their essays based on the concept that an essay was a magnified paragraph with an introductory paragraph, three or more body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Accordingly, even teaching essay writing through the traditional approach and via lectures by the instructor was effective in teaching the basic features of the essay writing especially about the structure and organization of the essays. The results show that the essay writing ability of two control groups where the main approach was traditional had improved too.

In order to answer the second question, it can be said that the better performance of the two experimental groups is related to the superiority of the task-based approach in teaching writing. This superiority has been emphasized by many scholars and researchers. As Ellis (2003), states this superiority lies in the meaningful, purposeful, communicative and authentic nature of the task-based approach. As a piece of valid evidence which supports such characteristics in favor of the task-based approach is the fact

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that the difference between the performance of the task-based classes and the performance of the traditional classes was greater on those parts of the scale used for scoring ESL compositions (Jacob, et al. Profile, 1981) which focused on meaning, content and communication rather than formal aspects of language. In any case, as far as punctuation was concerned the difference between the task-based groups and traditional groups was not very much.

But in the case of structure this difference increased in favor of the task-based classes. Again when it came to the vocabulary, the difference became more apparent. The greatest difference was found in content and in developing and conveying the intended meanings. And as we moved from the formal linguistic aspects of the narrative and expository writing toward the more functional aspects, it was observed that the performance of the task-based groups improved more and more. Therefore, it seems that task-based approach is really communicative and meaning-centered or in a better sense “uses language in order to learn it” in Howatt’s words (Howatt, 1984, p.279).

One of the other features which can be referred to as a reason for the outperformance of the TBLT classes in comparison with the traditional classes is the collaborative and interactive nature of the task-based approach where language use and language learning take place simultaneously. In the experimental groups, the students wrote their drafts in groups of 3 to 5. So the peer feedback can be thought of as an advantage for these two groups while in the two traditional classes students wrote their essays individually. Such an interpretation is in line with many previous studies and theories like the concept of ZPD and Sociocultural Theory. The

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students received feedback from the peers in their own groups, from peers from other groups and sometimes from the teacher. In the traditional classes subjects received feedback only from the teacher. Subjects in G3 and G4 used such a feedback both during the task cycle, that is during the writing process and after that on their final products during the post-task phase but the students in G1 and G2 received feedback only on the end product.

The findings of this study can have various pedagogical implications in TEFL/TESL. These implications can be used in different domains of TEFL, like language teaching methodology, syllabus design, materials development, and assessment.

1. Language Teaching Methodology

As far as the teaching methodology is concerned, task-based language teaching (TBLT) can be very helpful. The current study made it clear that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is definitely more effective than traditional approach in teaching writing in general and in teaching writing modes like narration and exposition in particular. In fact, teaching writing to EFL learners through task-based approach has all of the advantages of the process approach to writing such as the focus on the processes involved in the pre-writing, during writing and post-writing phases. Task-based approach pays enough attention to all of the processes which are involved in producing a good essay. It fully considers such processes and helps learners brainstorm and generate more new ideas; it also activates their previous

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schemata and background knowledge, motivates the students and encourages them to write freely without any concern over formal linguistic features. It adopts a dynamic view toward the act of writing and considers all of the involved factors and processes which take place when producing an essay. Moreover, it adds more peculiar aspects to the “process writing” by its complete task cycle. It also has a complete post-task phase or “a language focus phase” in which the specific structures and forms of language are focused on. It seems that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is very effective in teaching writing to EFL learners. Task-based approach can be used in teaching paragraph writing to the intermediate students and even in teaching writing skills to the beginners due to its robust pedagogical characteristics. Task-based approach can also be employed in the teaching of letter writing to EFL learners and ESP learners in Iran, and probably in other EFL contexts. Task-based approach seems to be the best methodology for teaching collaborative learning because it is quite interactive and follows the principles of cooperative learning. And another interesting feature of task-based approach is the use of peer feedback in a non-threatening condition.

2. Syllabus Design and Materials Development

With regard to the syllabus design and writing instructional materials, the findings of the present study suggest that each instructional situation is a unique one and it demands its own syllabus and instructional materials.

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According to the findings of present study teachers should write or select tasks for their own teaching situations. The teachers cannot use a set of fixed tasks or activities for all learners and in all situations, because in order to teach real-world and authentic language we have to use our situation aspects and the available resources in devising our tasks and instructional activities.

3. Language Assessment

The findings of the current study also suggest that formative assessment during the course can be more effective than final summative assessment at the end of the instructional period. For example, the essays written by the learners during the course can be assessed to check their progress instead of the final writing post-test. Furthermore task-based approach operationalizes the concept of alternative assessment in reality by focusing on the gradual progress of the learners' skill/knowledge during the instructional course.

That is, in task-based language teaching (TBLT), the ability to do/complete the tasks through language is both learning and at the same time it is the assessment of language learning that has occurred. Portfolio assessment as a very effective type of assessment can also be best practiced within the framework of task-based approach in teaching writing.

Task-based approach can be applied to teaching other writing modes such as descriptive vs. argumentative writing. It can be used in teaching other language skills and sub-skills like listening comprehension, vocabulary

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and grammar. The effect of formative task-based assessment on the writing performance of the Iranian EFL/ESP learners could also be a very good and interesting topic for further research.

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Appendices

Appendix A:

The Narrative Writing Post-test

Islamic Azad University of Hamedan, English Language Department

Course: Essay writing

Allocated time: 75 minutes

Student's Name:

Score:

- Using at least one flash-back and one flash-forward, tell the story of one of the following:
 - Your first day on a full-time job
 - Your first day in college/university
 - Your first meeting with someone who later became important in your life
- Your essays must have at least about 250 words.
- Please write your essays on the answer sheets in legible handwriting.

Appendix B:

The Expository Writing Post-test

Islamic Azad University of Hamedan, English Language Department

Course: Essay writing

Allocated time: 75 minutes

Student's Name:

Score:

- Assume that there has been an alarming increase in drug abuse among the university students. What might be the causes of this increase? Spend some time thinking about several possible causes for such a probable rise in substance abuse. Then, write a cause and affect essay based on the causes.
- Your essays must have at least about 250 words.
- Please write your essays on the answer sheets in legible handwriting.