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A Process-oriented Evaluation of EFL Writing Tasks in FCE/CAE Preparation Courses versus IELTS/TOEFL Courses of Iran

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Abstract

This research mainly aimed to analyze EFL writing tasks between two groups of the most popular ESOL exam preparation courses in Iran: IELTS and TOEFL versus FCE and CAE. According to the criteria of writing task appropriateness based on the process-oriented approach to writing instruction, 114 learner participants were asked to rate EFL writing tasks based on a checklist previously developed and validated. An observation process was conducted of the actual task performance in class to help explain

the significant results. According to learners' goals, needs and motivation in Iran, these courses were initially divided in two and through the statistical procedures, the mean scores of learners' ratings for all items of the checklist were compared between these groups. Significant differences were obtained in terms of several features especially related to writing procedures. The results are followed by a number of suggestions with the aim of improving the quality of writing instruction and task management for teachers, syllabus designers or material developers of these exam preparation courses.

Key terms: EFL writing tasks, task analysis, ESOL exam preparation courses, process-oriented approach to writing instruction.

Introduction

There have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing in the history of language teaching. These have evolved with the development of different approaches to teaching in general, which have in turn contributed to the changing role and status of writing within English language syllabuses and the English as a Foreign Language classroom. In spite of other general methodological changes, however, writing continues to be one of the most difficult areas for the teacher and learner of English to tackle.

Traditionally, writing was viewed mainly as a tool for the practice and reinforcement of certain grammatical or lexical patterns, a rather one-dimensional activity in which accuracy was all important and content and self-expression were trivial. However, with an increase in attention to students' practical needs born out of functional-notional approaches, the significance of writing certain text types as a skill was highlighted (Holmes, 2006). Among various approaches existing in the realm of writing instruction and learning, one of the sharpest contrasts belonged to the product-based versus the process-oriented approach, which forms the basis of this study.

Writing Process Approach and EFL Writing Tasks

Process approaches to writing are contrasted with product and genre approaches, with models and language-based curricula, and controlled, rhetorical and English for Academic Purpose (EAP) approaches. Process writing mainly criticizes the pre-process sentence-level focus and the other major criticism is the product approach characterized

by single-draft think→plan→write linear procedures, with once-off correction, and the use of target product models of writing (Bruton, 2005).

According to Trupe (2001), instructors who incorporate such attention to process in performing writing tasks have the opportunity to intervene in the students' writing process at any stage they are involved in. Students who are asked to spend more time on a writing assignment will think more about their topic, retain more information, and develop more powerful insights.

Various headings have been given to the different stages in the writing process, possibly the most exhaustive being White and Arndt's 'generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and re-viewing'. These stages generally involve different forms of brainstorming, selecting and ordering ideas, planning, drafting, redrafting and revising and editing. What follows is a presentation and introduction of the procedures involved which are further complemented by the participants' roles and also the setting where the writing task performance takes place.

Pre-writing

This stage includes anything the writer does before writing a draft of his document, such as thinking, taking notes, talking to others, brainstorming, outlining and gathering information (MIT center, 1999). When students spend time thinking about the writing process, they will be able to plan their strategies more effectively (Purude University Writing Lab, 2007). Sasaki (2000) conducted a research investigating the writing processes adopted by less-skilled and more skilled EFL learners. The results revealed that in pre-writing stage, the expert writers spent a longer time planning a detailed overall organization unlike the novices who spent a shorter time making a less global plan. Furthermore, studies such as the one carried out by Ojima (2006) attested to the fact that concept mapping as a form of pre-task planning was associated positively with the overall quality of the writing product during in-class compositions.

Draft-writing

This stage also called *drafting*, writing the *rough draft* or *first draft* comes when learners get their ideas on paper by organizing them in sentences and paragraphs. Walsh (2004) calls draft a quick write-out where the writers do not worry about the form or mechanics. As described in MIT center (1999), the draft tends to be writer-centered; it is you telling yourself what you know and think about the topic. In case the

writer has had sufficient pre-planning and organization, the drafting stage can be both a gratifying and an efficient experience.

Writers should not feel forced to write chronologically. Sometimes the conclusion can be an easier place to begin with than the thesis statement. With each writing assignment, students will be able to find a personal system that works best for them (Purude University Writing Lab, 2007).

Revising

This is the process of reviewing the paper on the ideal level. This process may involve changes such as the clarification of the thesis, the reorganization of paragraphs, and the omission of the extra information (Purude University Writing Lab, 2007). Much of the recent research into the process writing is monopolized by a focus on revision, whether individual or peer. Elbow (1998), cautions us against the counter-productive effect of premature revising. Frankenberg-Garcia (1999) stands in favor of providing student writers with pre-text feedback, i.e. before the draft is completed. In terms of the positive impact of feedback, Lee & Schallert (2008) argue that establishing a trusting relationship between teacher and students may be fundamental to the effective use of feedback in revision.

Besides the type and amount of feedback that teachers provide in the revising stage, peer feedback can as well be investigated. Peer response/review has been found to help both college and secondary students to obtain deeper insight into their writing and revision processes, develop a sense of ownership of the text, generate more positive attitudes toward writing, enhance audience awareness, and facilitate their second language acquisition and oral fluency development (Min, 2006). Combined with sufficient teacher and peer feedback, the revision process can have great impact on the improvement of student writing.

The results of a study conducted by Paulus (1999) revealed that while the majority of revisions that students made were surface-level revisions, the changes they made as a result of peer and teacher feedback were more often meaning-level changes than those they made on their own. Another study carried out in Chinese context by Miao. et al. (2006) compared teacher and peer feedback in writing revision. Their results showed that more teacher feedback is incorporated and leads to greater improvement, but peer feedback appears to bring about a higher percentage of meaning-change revision.

Editing

After improving the quality of content in the revising stage, writers need to take care of mechanics including corrections of spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc. This is the last step before publishing the final product. It is called *proofreading* as well which deals with "how you write" (MIT center, 1999). Three kinds of feedback can be given to the students in this stage: teacher, peer and self editing feedback. According to Stanley (2003), good writers must learn how to evaluate their own language – to improve through checking their own text, looking for errors, structure (self-editing). This way, students will become better writers.

However, for a beginner student who starts writing essays, self editing is most probably difficult. Rather, the teacher can provide more guidance during editing and/or proofreading with the student to set an example (Ozagac, 2004). If these types of editing are accompanied by peer type, the greatest impact will be produced. With the help of modern technology, for instance, we could think of e-feedback on the oral form-focused revision by friends and peers. The results of such a study conducted by Tuzi (2004) in an academic writing course, suggested that e-feedback had a greater impact than the oral one on revision and it helped L2 writers focus on larger writing blocks.

Publishing

After checking for surface level mistakes besides the content and general organization, it is time to publish the written products. As suggested by Gardner & Johnson (1997), learners could do this by reading out their written pieces loud for the whole class or for their peers in groups or pairs (cited in NCREL, 2004). Part of the advantages is that they can receive feedback on their completed works immediately after producing them. Moreover, the hearers, actually including the peer learners, besides the teacher could point out issues which might be a common source of problems for other learner writers as well. Therefore, it can act to the benefit of not only the writer but also the whole class.

Besides the writing procedures which have just been mentioned, there exist a number of more general and basic components of tasks. According to Nunan (2004) these are divided into goals, input and then the procedures which are supported by roles and settings. To start with, we need to regard the goal and rationale of the task. As suggested by Nunan (2004), goals may relate to a range of general outcomes (communicative, affective or cognitive) or may directly describe teacher's or learner's behavior. Among the required qualities of goals, he underlines their clarity to the

teacher and learner, task appropriateness to the proficiency level of learners and the extent to which the task encourages learners to apply classroom learning to the real world. As Jones & Shaw (2003) also pinpoint, writing tasks need to give all learners opportunity to perform to their utmost abilities.

There is also a need to consider the characteristics of task input. According to Nunan (2004), input refers to "the spoken, written and visual data that learners work with in the course of task completion. It can be provided by teacher, textbook or some other source" (p.47). Nunan is in favor of employing combination of authentic material and specially written input. Given the richness and variety of these resources, teachers are enabled to apply authentic written texts that are appropriate to the needs, interests and proficiency level of their students. Whoever provides the input, at any rate, should bear in mind that providing learners with a sample or samples of target language use before starting the task, as Muller (2006) suggests, enables learners to use it as a scaffold to which they can then add their own ideas.

In an attempt to engage learners' interest, as favored by advocates of process writing approach, the teacher can provide stimulating topics and deploy activities which help the students to express and develop their ideas and to develop tasks where they have a more genuine purpose to write and a stronger sense of the audience for whom they are writing (Holmes, 2006). As suggested by Massi (2001), through making conditions more authentic than the ones in traditional classroom tasks, an awareness of audience, purpose and intentionality will be reinforced. As recommended in the Annenberg Media (2007), in the selection of topics, attempt should be made that they interest learners of their age, sex, educational level, field of study and cultural background. Furthermore, the topic needs to be something about which students have some sort of knowledge. In writing tasks this can be done by choosing tasks that allow learners to capitalize on their prior experience. Teachers can devise class activities that develop and expand students' schemata (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).

The criteria of EFL writing task appropriateness have been collected from both the general components of writing tasks and also writing procedures derived from the process-oriented approach to writing instruction. These criteria were employed to analyze the tasks performed in a number of ESOL exam preparation courses in Iran which are introduced as the following.

ESOL Exam Preparation Courses in Iran

The world's leading range of exams for learners and teachers of English are offered by Cambridge ESOL which works with thousands of stakeholders in developing, administering, making and validating many different types of examinations within a consistent but evolving frame of reference (Milanovic, 2009). These exams are taken by over 3 million people in 130 countries. The four most popular of these exams around the world and in Iran are TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language), IELTS (International Language Testing System), FCE (First Certificate of English) and CAE (Certificate of Advanced English). Significance of tasks and task analysis is even more important for these candidates since the tasks involved in these courses, as suggested by Oxford (2006), are high-stake tasks producing high levels of anxiety on the part of learners'. Therefore, any attempts to analyze and enhance the quality of such instructional courses especially the writing skill is likely to be rewarding.

Conducting an interview with a number of experienced instructors of these courses in Iran illuminated a conspicuous difference between learners' motivation in these four courses. Although these courses are known and recognized worldwide as *exam preparation* courses, in Iran it appears that learners' goals and motivations differ considerably in these courses. Such difference divides the four courses in two major groups: IELTS and TOEFL at one end, where learners' motivation is more extrinsic, and FCE and CAE courses at the other end where students' goal is to improve their English proficiency and their motivation is, therefore, characterized as more intrinsically-oriented. The EFL writing tasks presented and performed in sample classes of these two major groups were analyzed in this study in search for the answer to the following question:

RQ: Is there a difference between the participants' ratings of EFL writing tasks in TOEFL/IELTS classes on one hand and FCE/CAE on the other?

HO: There is no significant difference between the participants' evaluation of EFL writing tasks in IELTS/TOEFL and FCE/CAE classes.

Methodology

Participants

The sample classes of the ESOL exam preparation courses which were attended in this study consisted of: 3 IELTS, 2 TOEFL, 3 FCE and 3 CAE ones. The participants were 114 learners consisting of 30 IELTS, 20 TOEFL, 37 FCE and 27 CAE adult learners of

intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. They included 51 boys and 63 girls whose first language was Persian and were all above 18 years of age. All the sample classes were attended and observed during the summer of 2009 and in five state and private language institutes of Mashhad in Iran.

Instrumentation

The criterion employed in analyzing writing tasks in the observed classes was a checklist of 20 items which were divided into two major sections, *task prompt* and *task procedures*, as can be seen in the Appendix. The first section (containing the first 8 items) dealt with the key general features contributing to the appropriateness of writing tasks. The second section including the remaining 12 items focused on the processes involved in the writing task performance and also addressed the learners' and teacher's roles. All the items were to be rated by choosing between four options: 0, 2, 4 and 6. The participants were not only supposed to do their ratings by selecting among the options, but they were also asked to provide explanatory notes whenever they felt necessary.

Procedures

What we did initially was to collect the criteria of evaluating writing tasks both in terms of more basic and general qualities and from a process-oriented perspective. In the light of the aforementioned review of related literature, the appropriateness features of the target tasks were derived and categorized into two major parts. In order to adhere to the principles of checklist development, the instructions provided by Bichelmeyer (2003), Stufflebeam (2000) and Scriven (2000) were followed. In order to validate the checklist, we followed the steps suggested by Dr. D. L. Stufflebeam at the Evaluation Centre of Western Michigan University (Personal correspondence).

Data Collection

During the whole data gathering process the researcher was present in the target classes. Each session was observed from the beginning to the end. Among the types of observation stated by Denzin & Lincoln (2005), the one adoped in this study was an *unobtrusive* one where the subjects are not aware that they are being studied. Besides, it was of a *descriptive* type where attempt is made to note down all the details by the observer without preconceptions or taking any points for granted.

At the end of the class time, when the task performance was over, the checklists were distributed among participants and a brief instruction was provided on the purpose of the analysis and how they were expected to do the rating. They were also asked to include any further comments wherever they felt it was needed on the related items. Moreover, learners were ensured that their identity would be kept unknown especially to their teacher. Almost all of the ratings were done between 10 to 15 minutes.

After the class time and in some cases before the class started, the instructors were interviewed briefly to pose their impression about the nature of these exam preparation courses, learners' motivation and also distinctive features of the observed classes (if any). This information provided further acquaintance with the participants' motivation in these preparatory courses which could help us in the grouping we made to the primary four groups of exam preparation courses.

Data Analysis

Two-sample t-test was employed in this research to compare the differences in mean scores of ratings. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for this aim, setting the alpha level at 0.05. The results are reported in the following section.

Results and Discussion

The question investigated in this research addressed EFL writing tasks in the two groups of ESOL exam preparation courses: Group 1 (IELTS/TOEFL) and Group 2 (FCE/CAE). It aimed to see if there existed any significant differences between ratings of writing tasks in these two groups of classes. Table 4-1 demonstrates the statistically significant results obtained from this comparison:

Table 4-1 Students' ratings of EFL writing tasks in Groups 1 and 2

Item	Group 1 and 2 (students)	N.	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig.	p
3	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	1.59	.911	-3.107	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	4.70	1.352				
5	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL	50	1.76	1.051	-0.816	112	0	s.

	)							
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	2.57	1.266				
9	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	4.39	.975	2.610	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	1.78	1.142				
10	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	4.82	1.149	3.356	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	1.46	1.305				
13	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	3.80	1.020	2.590	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	1.21	1.166				
14	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	4.98	1.090	0.535	112	0.012	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	4.44	1.104				
15	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	3.76	.879	2.136	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	1.62	1.128				
16	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	1.80	.841	0.971	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	.83	.993				
18	G1 (IELTS/TOEFL)	50	5.27	.974	4.567	112	0	s.
	G2 (FCE/CAE)	64	.70	.961				

According to table 4-1, in cases of both *task authenticity* investigated through item 3 (t-value= -3.107, p□.05) and *topic familiarity* investigated in item 5 (t-value= -0.816, p□.05) Group 2 gained significantly higher mean scores than Group 1. Item 3 assessed the extent to which the task encouraged learners to apply classroom learning to the outside world. This was closely related to the writing types and topics covered in these

groups. In four of the sample classes of Group 2 (FCE/CAE), formal, informal and application letters were worked on, and in the other class, descriptive writing was the type.

It appears that these have been much more practical than essay writing, graph writing and process writing which were the dominant writing types in the observed IELTS and TOEFL classes. The authenticity of these tasks did also affect the ratings of item 5 which evaluated the extent to which topics were familiar to learners' previous knowledge or experience. The findings again show higher rating for FCE and CAE classes, which implies that learners were more familiar with the topics covered in these courses.

With respect to task procedures, seven items made the major difference and rejected the null-hypothesis. Two of them assessed the quality of the *pre-writing* stage: item 9 (t-value= 2.610, p□.05) and 10 (t-value= 3.356, p□.05). Participants in Group 1 rated the existence of this stage considerably higher than Group 2. Learners' evaluation of teacher's feedback in this stage is also much lower in Group 2. According to the observations, this stage was entirely present in all the observed classes of the first group, especially TOEFL courses where it was explicitly assigned by the teachers. In FCE and CAE classes, however, this stage was conspicuously absent.

Although some brainstorming was provided by the textbook, the students were neither required by their teachers nor guided how to do them in pairs or groups. This is clearly reflected in the ratings of the 10th item which assessed *teacher's feedback* in prewriting (t-value= 3.356, p□.05). Differences are extended to the *revising* stage too, where the students were asked to assess their teacher's feedback on content in item 13 (t-value= 2.590, p□.05). Again it turns out that teacher's feedback in this stage is better evaluated in Group 1 than its counterpart. The observation process indicated that in IELTS classes, teachers directly drew students' attention to the register, style and expectations of the target reader before and while they were engaged in writing. In TOEFL classes, teachers used the board as well to guide the students further. Such an effective role was just observed in one class of Group 2, in which the teacher's overall feedback in all stages was vast and effective.

The items addressing *editing* types were also rated significantly different. The three related items, 14 (t-value= 0.535, p□.05), 15 (t-value= 2.136, p□.05) and 16 (t-value= 0.971, p□.05) obtained higher mean scores in Group 1 in comparison to Group 2, implying that students were more engaged in editing for grammar, spelling and

punctuation in IELTS and TOEFL classes than in FCE and CAE, as far as their own ratings show. The main reason could be the students' goal of taking part in these courses. In Group 1, the students had the real exam ahead and were keenly aware of how a poorly-edited writing would affect their overall band score.

The students participating in these courses also rated the *publishing* stage (item 18) much higher than Group 2 (t-value= 4.567, p□.05). It indicates that in IELTS or TOEFL classes more time is spent on the learners' reading out their texts than it is usually done in FCE and CAE courses. What we observed in these classes (IELTS and TOEFL) was that this stage was present in all of them. In two of these classes, all the students were asked to read out their texts and in the others, two-third of the students read their works out to the class. In FCE and CAE classes, however, this stage was remarkably missing and that makes the greatest difference observed in the writing procedures between these two groups of exam preparation courses.

Conclusion & Implications

The primary conclusion made out of this research was that EFL writing tasks could be evaluated from two aspects: a) the basic general features of appropriateness and b) the quality of writing process and participants' roles in task performance. EFL writing tasks in ESOL exam preparation courses were then compared according to both general features of appropriateness and those related to the writing procedures.

The researcher's personal experience previously as a learner and currently as an instructor of these exam preparation courses, along with the interviews with other experienced teachers, helped to divide the four most popular of these courses into two groups. This grouping was based on the goals, needs and motivation type of the learners in Iran, and resulted in the formation of Group 1 (IELTS/TOEFL) and Group 2 (FCE/CAE). In the first group, learners' goal was to get prepared for the actual exam which was a couple of months ahead. In the second group, however, learners' motivation was far more intrinsic and their primary goal was to improve their general language proficiency. It was intended to see how these two groups of learners evaluated the quality of writing tasks differently in these two types of ESOL exam preparation classes.

The findings of this research revealed that the students' assessment of writing tasks were different in a number of cases. The sharpest contrast, for instance, was found to be

in the *publishing* stage of task fulfillment which was explained according to the observations made of what actually occurred during the task performance. What follows now is a number of suggestions for instructors and syllabus designers who are working in the Iranian context of ESOL exam preparation courses. They are made according to the findings of this research:

Implications for IELTS and TOEFL Courses

1- Teachers need to have a closer monitoring on the students engaged in the *editing* stage of writing procedures, for grammar, spelling and punctuation.

2- Teachers should take care of the *authenticity* of writing tasks which are performed in class. Although they are bound to work on a limited pre-established topics which will appear in the real exam, they can try to explain and justify why it is needed for the learners to learn how to write this specific type of writing and how it will help them in their prospective life in L2 society.

3- Teachers can enhance *topic familiarity* to the learners by eliciting their familiar experiences in their first langrage to take advantage of the students' background knowledge and experience.

Implications for FCE and CAE Courses

1- Teachers should make sure that the task goal is appropriate to the *proficiency level* of the students. They can provide them with useful vocabulary or draw their attention to the grammatical structures that they need to use in the specific type of writing they are expected to produce during that session.

2- Teachers need to have a closer monitoring on students engaged in the *revising* stage especially by providing them with feedback on content and also *editing* stage of writing, especially editing for grammar and spelling.

3- Teachers should set for a *pre-writing* stage in class. They have to engage the students sufficiently and encourage them to work in pairs or groups to have some sort of brainstorming. They should also teach learners how to organize their ideas and pre-plan their writings.

4- Teachers are strongly recommended to ask at least some of the students to read out their written products in order to engage all the class in commenting and draw the students' attention to the possible common mistakes.

What we actually obtained through the conduction of this research can be of great value to whoever engaged in ESOL exam preparation especially as teachers in Iran. Moreover, the checklist can be employed by any EFL writing instructor to evaluate the tasks she or he is assigning to the students in class (not necessarily ESOL preparatory courses) or even in designing new tasks which could be better fitted with the students' needs, proficiency level, available time and other relevant factors.

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Appendix

Evaluation Checklist of EFL/ESL writing tasks (Students' version)	Ratings			
	Not at all (0)	A Little (2)	Adequately (4)	To a Great Extent (6)
The course: IELTS O TOEFL O FCE O CAE O Age: ……… Sex: MALE O FEMALE O				
Task Prompt				
1 **A.** *Task goal* - Was the overall goal of the task clear and void of ambiguity to you as a learner?	0	2	4	6
2 - Was the task appropriate to your current English proficiency level?	0	2	4	6
3 **B.** *Task authenticity* - To what extent did the task help you to apply classroom learning to the real world?	0	2	4	6
4 **C.** *Task topic* - Was the topic of the task stimulating and appropriate to your age and educational level?	0	2	4	6
5 - To what extent was the topic familiar to you and related to your background knowledge?	0	2	4	6
6 **D.** *Task instructions* - To what extent were the instructions clear and concise?	0	2	4	6
7 - Were the target reader and the features of the expected response (e.g. word/time limits, register) clarified in the instructions?	0	2	4	6
8 - Were any sample texts provided for you either by the teacher or the textbook?	0	2	4	6
Task Procedures				
9 **A.** *Pre-writing* - Did you spend time on brainstorming, gathering information or outlining before starting to write?	0	2	4	6
10 - Did the teacher familiarize you with techniques such as listing or clustering the ideas, or ask you to share your ideas in groups?	0	2	4	6
11 **B.** *Draft-writing* - Did you go through the second stage of putting ideas into sentences or paragraphs without concern for mechanics such as spelling or punctuation?	0	2	4	6
12 **C.** *Revising* - Did you revise your jotted down ideas to make sure of their sensibility and accurateness to the reader?	0	2	4	6
13 - Did you receive feedback on content from the teacher or perhaps a peer in this stage?	0	2	4	6
14 **D.** *Editing* - To what extent did you edit your writing for grammar and structure?	0	2	4	6
15 - To what extent did you edit your writing for word spelling?	0	2	4	6
16 - To what extent did you edit your writing for punctuation, before submitting it?	0	2	4	6
17 - Did you receive feedback on form from your teacher in this stage?	0	2	4	6
18 **E.** *Publishing* - Did you read out your texts finally to the class or your peers?	0	2	4	6
19 - To what extent was the teacher's feedback on the completed piece of writing motivating?	0	2	4	6
20 * To what extent did the task performance occur outside classroom environment (e.g. in a library or language lab)?	0	2	4	6