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Learners' Evaluation of EFL writing Tasks in Iran's ESOL Exam Preparation Courses*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to analyze EFL writing tasks in the most popular ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) exam preparation courses in Iran: IELTS, TOEFL, FCE and CAE. Having collected the criteria of writing task appropriateness in light of the process-oriented approach to writing instruction, 114 learner participants were asked to rate EFL writing tasks based on a checklist previously gathered and validated. An observation process was conducted of the task performance followed by an interview with teachers about the nature of these courses and learners' motivation. According to the learners' primary needs and goals, the four types of courses were initially divided into two groups: Group-1 (IELTS/TOEFL) and Group-2 (FCE/CAE). The independent-sample t-test was employed to compare the mean scores of ratings for all items of the checklist once between IELTS and TOEFL courses in Group 1 and once between FCE and CAE in Group 2. Significant differences were obtained especially related to the quality of writing procedures .

Key words: EFL writing tasks, process-oriented approach to writing instruction, ESOL exam preparation courses

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Introduction

Research on L2 writing has grown exponentially over the last 40 years and during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, second language writing began to evolve into an interdisciplinary field of inquiry (Matsuda, 2003). In the history of language teaching, there have been numerous approaches to the writing instruction. 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.

1.1. 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 Controlled-Guided-Free (CGF) sequences which can be immediate or developmental, signifying that writing tasks might be a combination of controlled, guided and free parts all in one, or that they include controlled and free tasks used simultaneously, or that there might be a movement from controlled to guided and then to free tasks over time. 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 the realm of writing instruction, 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. Furthermore, students' writing skills need practice in order to develop and such

development is not achieved unless sufficient time and attention is being devoted. Then the effective intervention results in better products.

Bruton (2005) points out some of the similarities between process writing (ProW) and communicative task-based instruction (CTBI). He argues that both assume tasks that prompt self-expression to motivate students and as the principle engine for developing L2 proficiency in language classroom. In both ProW and CTBI, the processes attended are cognitive and social in nature, in the sense that the focus is on the individual in interaction and the discourse under scrutiny tends to be more extended.

Now that the awareness is raised of the significant roles that wisely-devised writing tasks can play in EFL classes, we would like to know in the first place what the features of appropriateness for these tasks are and then try to analyze a sample of these tasks in a group of EFL courses held in Iran which are going to be introduced as follows.

1.2. ESOL exam preparation courses in Iran

Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) 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). It offers the world's leading range of exams for learners and teachers of English taken by over 3 million people in 130 countries. These exams are internationally recognized and accepted by universities, employers and educational organizations. They help people gain entrance to a university or college, improve their job prospects, and measure their progress in English (Experts in Language Assessment, 2009).

The four most popular of these exams around the world and in our country 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). Candidates pay huge amounts of money so as to get prepared for these exams either by taking up private lessons or attending preparation courses. 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.

Moreover, the problem that the researcher has faced through personal experience once as a candidate and now as an instructor of these courses is the disquality of writing tasks in these classes at times which seems to lie partly in the nature of tasks and partly in the teachers' approach and task management. Concerning the first one, it seems that most of the writing tasks in these classes do not even comply with the general features of task appropriateness. On the teachers' side, provision of a checklist comprised of the criteria of writing task appropriateness could be of great benefit to make up for their lack of competence in analysing tasks, adapting or even designing them (if required).

1.3. The purpose of this research

The aim of this study is first to scrutinize the underlying features of the process that learners have to undergo during the writing task performance to produce effective texts. The criteria collected can act as an evaluative tool to be employed by EFL/ESL instructors, learners and syllabus designers to analyze, adapt or create new tasks. Next, it is intended to conduct analyses of the tasks performed in a group of writing classes which are preparing for ESOL examinations. Therefore, there are three main questions that we hope to investigate in this study:

RQ1: What are the *basic and general* features of appropriateness for EFL writing tasks?

RQ2: What are the features of appropriateness for the *process* of EFL writing in EFL writing tasks?

RQ3: Is there a difference between learners' evaluation of EFL writing tasks in TOEFL and IELTS exam preparation courses?

RQ4: Is there a difference between learners' evaluation of EFL writing tasks in FCE and CAE exam preparation courses?

The first two research questions, obviously, refer to the qualitative phase of this research. Therefore, there are no hypotheses to offer. In case of the third and fourth questions, however, the following null-hypotheses are presented:

H1: There is no significant difference between learners' evaluation of EFL writing tasks in IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses.

H2: There is no significant difference between learners' evaluation of EFL writing tasks in FCE and CAE preparation courses.

2- Review of the Related Literature

EFL or ESL tasks in general could be analyzed from different facets. These aspects either belong to the basic and general features of tasks or pertain to some specific property which is supposed to exist in a particular task or task type. Writing tasks are no exceptions. Not only do they have to comply with certain basic qualities of appropriateness, but they also need to obey certain detailed and specific features in order to function as effectively as possible. Our attempt to collect the criteria was made in a way so as to target both types of qualitative features. What follows presents a review of what the researchers, theorists and practitioners have gained and proposed to date with respect to tasks, task analysis, L1 and L2 writing tasks and other related areas.

2.1. General components of writing tasks

Nunan (2004) divides the basic components of tasks in general into *goals*, *input* and *procedures* which are supported by *roles and settings*. The specific features of each of these main components are to be inspected in the design and analysis of writing tasks as well. 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. Moreover, they should simultaneously eliminate variations in rating that can be attributed to the task rather than the candidates' respective abilities especially in EFL performance tests.

Next, we should consider characteristics of the 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 a teacher, a 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. Sometimes the input is gathered from reading sources as a common form of academic task called discourse synthesis, and students are required to select, organize and connect from source texts as they compose their new text (Segev-Miller, 2004). However, this is not the case in ESOL exam preparation classes where the input is much briefer and provided by either the teacher or the textbook. 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 and then can 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 on them 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).

Besides the more general features of the task input, task instructions require great care and attention. The first and primary characteristic is clarity and conciseness. Learners need to be presented with clearly defined tasks which cannot be easily misinterpreted. The instructions should also indicate the amount of time allowed for

writing and the approximate number of words and length of the expected response (Annenberg Media, 2007). In terms of timing, for instance, the teacher can elect to allow the students to complete the task in their own time or can set time limits. If the emphasis is on accuracy in a task performance, it has to be ensured that students are working at their own speed. However, if they intend to encourage fluency or in case they prefer to simulate the real exam condition (as it is usually the case in ESOL exam preparation courses), teachers had better set a time limit (Ellis, 2006). Another point which deserves attention is that the development of ability to write a particular genre requires that learners are given the chance to deal with texts which are samples of that genre. Through the exposure to similar texts, students can notice the specific configurations of that genre. They can also activate their memory of previous reading or writing experience of texts similar to the one they are asked to produce (Cabral, 2004).

2.2. Specific components of writing tasks (task performance)

Wherever there exists more than a product approach to the writing instruction and learning and students are assigned to perform a task or two during the class time with the presence of their teacher and peers, this process can be evaluated by means of the guidelines provided by the process writing theorists and practitioners. As described in MIT writing and communication center (1999), writing is a process which involves at least four distinct steps: *prewriting*, *drafting*, *revising*, and *editing*. The commonalities among the procedures suggested by the main figures of this approach all include the stages of brainstorming, planning, writing the rough draft, editing, proofreading and publishing the final draft (Ozagic, 2004). What follows is a presentation and introduction of these procedures further complemented by the participants' roles and also the setting where the writing task performance takes place.

2.2.1. Pre-writing

This stage includes anything the writer does before writing a draft of one's 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 get enabled 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.

2.2.2. 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 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).

2.2.3. 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 more 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.

2.2.4. 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 proof-reading 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 counterpart on revision and it helped L2 writers focus on larger writing blocks.

2.2.5. Publishing

After making sure that the final draft is produced and has been checked for surface level mistakes besides the content and general organization, it is time to make it published. 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 they have been produced. 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.

2.3. ESOL exam preparation research

Historically, large-scale English as a second language (ESL) admission testing has been dominated by two test batteries: the Cambridge exams including FCE, CAE and CPE, sponsored by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), from Educational Testing Service (ETS). The Cambridge exams have been constructed more like an achievement test with strong links between the examination and teaching syllabi. The hallmark of TOEFL, on the other hand, is its psychometric qualities with a strong emphasis on reliability. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), is also operated by UCLES and is to measure both academic and general English language proficiency. Several publications have examined a variety of issues related to the instruments under investigation e.g. Bachman et al. 1993, 1988 and Spolsky, 1995. These articles, however, were intended primarily for language testing researchers (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000).

In terms of assessing the quality of IELTS preparation courses, mention can be made of Rao et al.'s (2003) investigation of the impact of attending these courses on learners' performance on the general writing test module. Their findings revealed that there was significant gain in the scores of candidates in the writing module. They also highlighted the influence of several factors such as time, motivation, anxiety and the nature of the skill itself on the candidates'

performance during the preparation program and in the actual IELTS exam. In a similar vein, a more recent work, conducted by Mickan and Motteram (2008), attempted to find the typical features of pedagogy in IELTS preparation classes. Following a period of observation, they reported an eclectic approach that covered information about test format, test tasks, awareness-raising of the sections of the tasks, practical hints and strategies for doing the test tasks,

The related body of literature has most frequently focused on the assessment of some testing quality such as the authenticity, reliability and validity of the writing tasks included in these exams. Even when considering the introductory courses, little effort has been made to cast an ethnographic outlook at what really goes on in such classes and how the preparatory tasks are designed, performed and managed in the real class environment. As put forth previously, the need is felt for such evaluative research not only to fill the existing gap in the literature, but also to take at least one further step to assess and provide suggestions for the sake of writing skill itself which has long suffered negligence compared to other skills especially in the context of Iran. This is what we hope to achieve through the conduction of this research. The followong chapter presents the steps and procedures taken for this aim.

3- Methodology

3.1. Participants

Eleven classes representative of the four most popular ESOL exam preparation courses were attended including: 3 IELTS, 2 TOEFL, 3 FCE and 3 CAE classes. The participants were 114 learners including 30 IELTS, 20 TOEFL, 37 FCE and 27 CAE students who were adult learners of intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. Concerning the age and sex of the learners, it should be mentioned that they were 51 boys and 63 girls whose first language was Persian and were all 18 plus, with Persian as their first language. All the sample classes were attended and observed during summer and in five language institutes of Mashhad, Iran.

3.2. 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

Appendix A. The first section (containing the first 8 items) dealt with the key general features contributing to the appropriateness of writing tasks. The second section which included the remaining 12 items focused on the processes involved in the writing task performance and also addressed the learner and teacher's roles. All the items were supposed to be rated in likert type to choose between four options of 0, 2, 4 and 6. The first option represented the total lack of the quality or stage. The second one showed the presence of the feature to a little but insufficient extent. The third option indicated that the feature existed adequately and finally the fourth one meant the existence of the feature to a great and most satisfactory extent. The participants were not only supposed to do their ratings by selecting among the options, but they were also asked to provide explanatory notes wherever they thought it would be needed. Learners' checklists were accompanied by the translation of the items in the respondents' first language that is Persian in order to guarantee intelligibility of the questions. Translations were provided on the other side of the English version to be referred to in case needed (see Appendix B). The development and validation of the checklist is further explained in the following section, the Procedures.

3.3. Procedures

The initial step taken was the collection of the criteria to evaluate 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 collected and categorized into two major sections. In order to adhere to the principles of checklist development, the instructions provided by Bichelmeyer (2003), Stufflebeam (2000) and Scriven (2000) were taken into consideration. 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).

Considering all the recommended issues, the criteria were initially gathered through reviewing the theories and practices of EFL/ESL writing theorists and researchers especially those proposing the process approach to writing instruction and formed the primary version of the checklist. Then this version was sent to some of the

international composition experts and researchers to get their feedback on the content and even form of the questions and their groupings. Among those who helped validate the checklist were:

- P. K. Matsuda, associate professor of English and the director of Writing Programs at Arizona State University,
- J. Hedgcock, professor of language acquisition, reading and writing instruction, co-author of the first and second edition of *Teaching ESL Composition* at the Monterey Institute of Intermediate Studies, an affiliate of Middlebury College,
- H. V. Hoang, assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst,
- M. Walsh, master of TEFEL/TESOL from University of Birmingham, CELS, UK and EFL instructor in Osaka, Japan.

Having considered the issues pinpointed by the reviewers, transformations of the initial draft and the revised version were prepared accordingly. Accompanied by the translations, the final version was submitted to an IELTS pre-writing class consisting of 10 learners to make sure that the questions were sufficiently comprehensible to a sample of subjects and to see if any problems would possibly arise when the students were actually engaged in the rating process. The required time was also checked in this brief pilot application.

3.3.1. Data Collection

The actual data gathering process was carried out with the researcher's presence 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 carried out in this study was an unobtrusive one (also known as non-reactive) 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. As far as the explicitness of the purpose of research is concerned, it was decided to adopt the newer view which is, as Potter (2002) describes, in favor of covert methods of research and does not approve of full disclosure of the purpose of any research project in order to impede people from hiding their true feelings or ideas.

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. Participants were not under pressure for time; however, 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 helped us to categorize the four types of preparation courses into two major groups: Group 1 consisting of IELTS and TOEFL courses that learners attend in order to get prepared for the real exam which is usually several months ahead, and Group 2 including FCE and CAE courses where the majority of learners aim to improve their general knowledge of English language.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

Two-sample t-test was employed in this research to evaluate the differences between mean scores of ratings. As the samples of all groups consisted of different sets of individual subjects, the unpaired or independent-samples t-test was employed to assess the significance of the difference between the means on each and every item of the checklist. 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 chapter.

4- Results and Discussion

The first two questions of this research dealt with collecting the criteria needed to evaluate EFL/ESL writing tasks. How these criteria were gathered, grouped and validated was described in detail in the Methodology section. The result was a checklist consisting of twenty items each of which evaluated one aspect of task appropriateness. One

privilege of this checklist to those existing before in the realm of writing is that it not only enquires about the general factors of writing task appropriateness, but it also addresses the specific features related to writing procedures. Furthermore, no similar checklists had been developed, to the researcher's knowledge, in the realm of L2 writing instruction with the aim of class-based task analysis. Now the provision of this checklist acts to the benefit of EFL/ESL writing teachers, task designers, material developers and consequently the students. Particularly in this research this checklist was employed to evaluate EFL writing tasks at ESOL exam preparation courses in Iran, as it is stated in the other two questions of this study.

The third question of this research addressed the students' ratings between IELTS and TOEFL courses in Group 1. Table 4-1 demonstrates the results of this comparison:

Table 4-1

As it can be seen in table 4-1, none of the features in Task Prompt section which comprised the first eight items of the checklist produced any significant differences between writing tasks of these two courses. These items were supposed to assess the basic, general qualities of task appropriateness. The null hypothesis is, therefore, not rejected in terms of these general qualities. Two of the Task Procedures items (12 and 16), however, made the divergence points between these two courses. The *revising* stage was rated satisfactorily high in both IELTS and TOEFL; however, it was significantly higher in TOEFL classes than in IELTS. In the observed TOEFL classes, students were allowed more time to produce their texts. This, undoubtedly, affected their performance. Usually when students face time limitation, they tend to prioritize editing to revising; that is, they pay more attention to the structures, vocabulary and the like, rather than contemplating the extent to which their texts meet the reader's expectations.

Item 16 which addressed learners' role in *editing for punctuation*, was rated low in the both courses. However, it was significantly higher in TOEFL classes compared to IELTS. According to class observations, one of the teachers in TOEFL classes used the board to remind learners' of the required punctuation of conjunctions in texts. This could have affected the students' rating of the related item. As it

is evident in table 4-2, a greater number of differences is observed in exam reparation courses of Group 2.

Table 4-2

As indicated in this table, three items of Task Prompt section made the major differences between the FCE and CAE courses. Item 5 which assessed *topic familiarity* along with item 8 which addressed *sample provision* were rated significantly higher in FCE classes. According to observations made of FCE classes, the topics which were worked on were 'informal letter' and 'application letter'. While in CAE classes students were engaged in learning 'descriptive writing' and 'article writing'. Obviously, letter writing is much more common and practical than essay writing or descriptive texts in learners' personal lives, and it probably is closer to their background experiences. This could have led to the higher rating obtained in FCE courses. With respect to item 8, again according to the observations, two of the FCE teachers made use of additional sample texts besides those provided by the textbook. The copies were distributed among the students and were discussed briefly as a whole class activity. In CAE classes, however, merely the samples in the textbook were reviewed.

Divergence in Task Prompt is further extended to *task information* (item 7). As the results show, this feature was significantly higher in CAE courses than in FCE. What is meant by task information is specification of the features of the expected response and the target reader. As it was observed in these classes, CAE teachers showed greater sensitivity about the addressee of the texts that the students were writing, and also about the register of the text. Both before and during the students' writing performance, they insisted that learners pay attention to these issues. It was not that in FCE classes, teachers did not emphasize these requirements at all. However, the degree of their persistence was perceived to be lower.

Discrepancy also showed up in four stages of the writing performance, beginning with *pre-writing*. Learners' evaluation of *teachers' feedback* in this stage was significantly higher in CAE classes than its counterpart. As mentioned earlier, this stage involves whatever planning the writer does before the actual draft writing. In the class environment, students usually work in pairs or groups to

have some sort of brainstorming. As suggested by Rao (2007), EFL teachers can play effective roles here by teaching brainstorming strategies which contribute to activating students' thinking and creating ideas. According to the observations made of FCE classes, teachers even ignored the brief brainstorming section provided in the textbook. One of the problems these teachers mentioned in their interviews was the shortage of time. But in fact, time limitations for these classes were not stricter than a typical CAE class. The ratings of this stage could have been much higher in the both courses if teachers had provided learners with a chance to work together before getting down to writing.

Lower rating of *teachers' feedback* in FCE classes was extended to the *revising* stage. In the CAE classes which were observed, teachers attempted to draw students' attention to the significance of content coverage by a couple of questions asked chorally. They could have made use of the board as well; however, they did not do so. Such procedure was missing in classes of the counter group. Similarly, in the *editing* stage where the texts are usually checked for grammatical and structural shortcomings, *teacher's feedback on form* obtained a significantly lower rating in FCE classes. As it was observed during the time students were engaged in writing, teachers in the sample FCE classes did not have as effective monitoring on students' performance as their colleagues in CAE classes. Sufficient monitoring enhances teacher's availability to learners. This must have contributed to the higher rating of this feature in CAE classes.

Finally, a significant discrepancy appeared between ratings of the two courses in the *publishing* stage, which is the last stage of writing procedures to be performed in class. As it is evident in table 4-2, although the related item (item 18) was rated low in the both courses, CAE classes continued to outperform FCE ones with respect to this feature. Here what mattered was the extent to which this stage was gone through in these classes; that is to say the extent to which the students were required to read their texts out in class. Referring back to class observations, this stage was conspicuously absent in FCE classes. In one of the CAE classes, however, the teacher asked three of the students to read out their texts. Nevertheless, as the observations showed and the results of ratings confirmed, it had been far from adequate.

5. Conclusion, Implications & Suggestions

The primary goal behind conducting this research was to evaluate EFL writing tasks in ESOL exam preparation courses. To achieve this aim, a reliable criterion was needed to base our judgment on. Therefore, we attempted to collect these criteria from the theories and practices of the key figures of L2 writing research especially the experts of the process-oriented approach to writing instruction. The primary conclusion 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 compared according to both general features of appropriateness and those related to the writing procedures. However, before setting out the comparison, a major division was made between these courses based on the goals, needs and motivation type of the learners in Iran. The researcher's personal experience previously as a learner and currently as an instructor of these exam preparation courses, along with the interviews with experienced teachers, helped to divide these courses into 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 since their primary goal was to improve their general language proficiency. They, consequently, were not pressed for time or forced to take up the course.

Having collected the students' ratings of EFL writing tasks in sample classes of each course, a comparison was made between two courses in each group. The two research null-hypotheses were rejected in case of a couple of the checklist items. According to the findings, the following suggestions are provided for instructors of these classes which can help improve the quality of EFL writing tasks:

5.1. Suggestions for IELTS and TOEFL courses

1- In IELTS classes, teachers are recommended to directly draw students' attention to reader's expectations. They should teach learners how they have to shift from the writer-centered position to a reader-centered one in *revising* stage to see the text from the viewpoint of the reader so as to meet their expectations.

2- In these two courses, teachers need to have a closer monitoring on the students' performance in the *editing* stage of writing procedures, especially for *punctuation*.

3- In IELTS classes, particularly, where *editing for punctuation* was rated even lower than in TOEFL, greater attention is required on the part of teachers to the students' engagement in editing for mechanics, especially punctuation.

5.2. Suggestions for FCE and CAE courses

1- In consideration of topic limitations that exist in these courses, still there are ways through which teachers can enhance *topic familiarity*. By means of a brief warm-up, for instance, in pre-writing stage teachers can attempt to elicit some sort of background knowledge or similar experience in students. Even if that belongs to their experiences in L1, it can still be of value.

2- Tasks in FCE classes can become more informative if teachers try to draw students' attention to the features of the expected type of writing they are going to produce. They can even use the board to enlist features such as the register, target reader and word limit.

3- Teachers in CAE classes can provide supplementary sample texts to the one offered in the textbook, or even distribute copies of the sample type of writing which compares it to other similar types. For instance, in case the students are to learn a formal writing that session, if they have access to an informal type as well, they can observe the differences directly and practically and better remember them.

4- With regard the low ratings of *teacher's feedback* in *pre-writing* stage, teachers in both FCE and CAE courses need to guide learners into organizing their ideas and planning their writings.

5- FCE and CAE teachers especially those of the second course, should provide a far more effective *feedback on the content* of what the students are writing. This ought to be done in the *revising* stage, where learners should be reminded of whatever required to be included in their writings.

6- FCE teachers need to have a closer monitoring on learners while they are engaged in writing. They should be adequately approachable to learners in case they have any difficulty *editing* their writings for structural mistakes.

7- In both FCE and CAE classes, teachers should ask students to read out at least part of their texts to the class. If shortage of time does not permit asking them all, some of them at least had better read their products so that all the class can comment on them.

The obvious thing is that not all the twenty items of the checklist produced significant differences between the two groups. However, what was actually obtained can be of great value to whoever engaged in these introductory courses especially as teachers in Iran. Besides, the checklist can be employed by any EFL writing instructor to evaluate the tasks s/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.



List of Tables

Table 4-1- students' ratings in Groups 1 (IELTS/TOEFL)

Item	Raters	N.	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)	p
1 <i>Clarity of task goal</i>	IELTS	30	4.97	1.016	-0.286	48	0.776	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	5.05	1.026				
2 <i>Appropriateness to students' level</i>	IELTS	30	4.97	1.016	-0.286	48	0.777	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	5.05	1.026				
3 <i>Authenticity</i>	IELTS	30	1.81	.946	1.584	48	0.122	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	1.37	.955				
4 <i>Topic appropriateness to students' level</i>	IELTS	30	4.97	1.140	0.394	48	0.687	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.84	1.015				
5 <i>Topic familiarity</i>	IELTS	30	2.00	1.155	1.692	48	0.080	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	1.47	.905				
6 <i>Clarity of task instruction</i>	IELTS	30	4.84	1.003	0.350	48	0.728	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.74	.991				
7 <i>Task information</i>	IELTS	30	4.26	.999	-0.954	48	0.345	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.53	.905				
8 <i>Sample provision</i>	IELTS	30	5.03	1.016	1.007	48	0.319	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.74	.991				
9 <i>Pre-writing</i>	IELTS	30	4.19	1.078	-1.303	48	0.199	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.58	.902				
10 <i>Teacher's feedback</i>	IELTS	30	4.52	1.458	-1.403	48	0.167	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	5.05	1.026				
11 <i>Draft-writing</i>	IELTS	30	4.45	.995	-0.603	48	0.531	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.63	.955				
12 <i>Revising</i>	IELTS	30	3.81	.792	-1.885	48	0.066	s.
	TOEFL	20	4.21	.631				
13 <i>Teacher's feedback on content</i>	IELTS	30	3.81	.946	0.399	48	0.691	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	3.68	1.204				
14 <i>Editing for grammar</i>	IELTS	30	4.84	1.128	-1.008	48	0.319	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	5.16	1.015				

Item	Raters	N.	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)	p
15 <i>Editing for spelling</i>	IELTS	30	3.81	.946	0.861	48	0.393	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	3.58	.838				
16 <i>Editing for punctuation</i>	IELTS	30	1.55	.850	-2.289	48	0.027	s.
	TOEFL	20	2.11	.809				
17 <i>Teacher's feedback on form</i>	IELTS	30	4.45	1.121	-0.582	48	0.563	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.63	.955				
18 <i>Publishing</i>	IELTS	30	5.10	1.350	-0.465	48	0.644	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	5.26	.991				
19 <i>Teacher's feedback on completed piece of writing</i>	IELTS	30	4.60	1.070	-1.125	48	0.266	n.s.
	TOEFL	20	4.95	1.026				
20 <i>Task setting</i>	IELTS	30	.00	.000(a)				
	TOEFL	20	.00	.000(a)				

Table 4-2- students' ratings in Groups 2 (FCE/CAE)

Item	Raters	N.	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)	p
1 <i>Clarity of task goal</i>	FCE	37	4.97	1.118	1.278	62	0.206	n.s.
	CAE	27	5.33	1.109				
2 <i>Appropriateness to students' level</i>	FCE	37	4.92	1.211	-0.639	62	0.252	n.s.
	CAE	27	5.11	1.155				
3 <i>Authenticity</i>	FCE	37	4.43	1.425	-2.034	62	0.052	n.s.
	CAE	27	5.11	1.155				
4 <i>Topic appropriateness to students' level</i>	FCE	37	4.70	1.175	-0.925	62	0.359	n.s.
	CAE	27	4.96	1.018				
5 <i>Topic familiarity</i>	FCE	37	2.92	1.460	2.131	62	0.037	s.
	CAE	27	2.22	1.013				
6 <i>Clarity of task instruction</i>	FCE	37	4.43	1.425	1.281	62	0.212	n.s.
	CAE	27	5.19	1.145				
7 <i>Task information</i>	FCE	37	4.22	1.134	-2.833	62	0.006	s.
	CAE	27	5.04	1.160				

Item	Raters	N.	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)	p
8 <i>Sample provision</i>	FCE	37	5.24	1.090	2.823	62	0.006	s.
	CAE	27	4.44	1.155				
9 <i>Pre-writing</i>	FCE	37	1.84	1.280	0.202	62	0.841	n.s.
	CAE	27	1.78	1.013				
10 <i>Teacher's feedback</i>	FCE	37	.97	1.301	-3.635	62	0.001	s.
	CAE	27	2.07	1.035				
11 <i>Draft-writing</i>	FCE	37	3.95	1.373	-1.812	62	0.075	n.s.
	CAE	27	4.52	1.051				
12 <i>Revising</i>	FCE	37	4.05	1.666	-0.255	62	0.799	n.s.
	CAE	27	4.15	1.099				
13 <i>Teacher's feedback on content</i>	FCE	37	.92	1.115	-2.222	62	0.030	s.
	CAE	27	1.56	1.155				
14 <i>Editing for grammar</i>	FCE	37	4.38	1.037	-0.758	62	0.451	n.s.
	CAE	27	4.59	1.217				
15 <i>Editing for spelling</i>	FCE	37	1.62	1.139	-0.028	62	0.978	n.s.
	CAE	27	1.63	1.115				
16 <i>Editing for punctuation</i>	FCE	37	.65	.949	-1.871	62	0.066	n.s.
	CAE	27	1.11	1.013				
17 <i>Teacher's feedback on form</i>	FCE	37	4.27	1.347	-2.855	62	0.006	s.
	CAE	27	5.19	1.145				
18 <i>Publishing</i>	FCE	37	.05	.329	-9.835	62	0	s.
	CAE	27	1.56	.847				
19 <i>Teacher's feedback on completed piece of writing</i>	FCE	37	.	.		62		
	CAE	27	4.76	1.179				
20 <i>Task setting</i>	FCE	37	.00	.000(b)		62		
	CAE	27	.00	.000(b)				

Appendix A

Evaluation Checklist of EFL/ESL writing tasks (Students' version)		Ratings			
The course: IELTS <input type="radio"/> TOEFL <input type="radio"/> FCE <input type="radio"/> CAE <input type="radio"/>		Not at all (0)	A Little (2)	Adequately (4)	To a Great Extent (6)
Age:					
Sex: MALE <input type="radio"/> FEMALE <input type="radio"/>					
Task Prompt					
	A. Task goal				
1	- 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
	B. Task authenticity				
3	- To what extent did the task help you to apply classroom learning to the real world?	0	2	4	6
	C. Task topic				
4	- 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
	D. Task instructions				
6	- 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					
	A. Pre-writing				
9	- 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
	B. Draft-writing				
11	- 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

Evaluation Checklist of EFL/ESL writing tasks (Students' version)		Ratings			
The course: IELTS <input type="radio"/> TOEFL <input type="radio"/> FCE <input type="radio"/> CAE <input type="radio"/> Age: Sex: MALE <input type="radio"/> FEMALE <input type="radio"/>		Not at all (0)	A Little (2)	Adequately (4)	To a Great Extent (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 <u>content</u> 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 <u>form</u> 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	- 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

Appendix B

Evaluation Checklist of EFL/ESL writing tasks (Students' version)		Ratings			
The course: IELTS O TOEFL O FCE O CAE O Age: Sex: MALE O FEMALE O		به هیچ وجه (۰)	کمی (۲)	به میزان کافی (۴)	تأحد زیادی (۶)
داده های تمرین					
1	الف- هدف تمرین - آیا هدف کلی این تمرین برای شما کاملاً واضح و بدون ابهام بود؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
2	- آیا تمرین را متناسب با سطح فعلی زبان خود می بینید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
3	ب- واقعی بودن تمرین - این تمرین تا چه حد کمک کرد شما چیزی را یاد بگیرید که بعد در دنیای خارج از کلاس به کار ببرید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
4	ج- موضوع تمرین - آیا موضوع این تمرین جالب و متناسب با سن و سطح علمی شما بود؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
5	- تا چه حد با موضوع این تمرین آشنا بودید؟ اطلاعات یا تجربه قبلی از آن داشتید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
6	د- دستورالعمل تمرین - تا چه حد دستورالعمل این تمرین شفاف و مختصر بود؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
7	- آیا مخاطب اثر و نیز ویژگی های متن خواسته شده (مثلاً تعداد کلمات، مدت زمان و گونه کاربرد) در دستورالعمل کاملاً مشخص شده بود؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
8	- آیا مثال یا متنی به عنوان نمونه توسط استاد یا کتاب درسی آورده شده بود؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
مراحل انجام تمرین					
9	الف-(Pre-writing): - آیا قبل از آنکه چیزی را روی کاغذ بیاورید، به تنهایی یا به صورت گروهی وقتی را به اندیشه گشایی جمع آوری اطلاعات یا لیست کردن اطلاعات خود اختصاص دادید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
10	- آیا استادان شما را با تکنیک هایی نظیر لیست کردن و دسته بندی ایده ها ی تان آشنا کرد؟ یا اینکه از شما بخواهد گروهی این کار را بکنید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
11	ب-(Draft-writing): - آیا مرحله دوم را که پیاده کردن ایده ها در قالب جمله و پاراگراف است (بدون توجه به املا کلمات یا ظرایف) سپری کردید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶

Evaluation Checklist of EFL/ESL writing tasks (Students' version)		Ratings			
The course: IELTS <input type="radio"/> TOEFL <input type="radio"/> FCE <input type="radio"/> CAE <input type="radio"/> Age: Sex: MALE <input type="radio"/> FEMALE <input type="radio"/>		به هیچ وجه (۰)	کمی (۲)	به میزان کافی (۴)	تا حد زیادی (۶)
12	ج- (Revising): - آیا مرحله سوم یعنی بازنگری متن را انجام دادید تا مطمئن شوید آنچه نوشته‌اید از دید خواننده معقول و مقبول می‌باشد؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
13	- آیا در این مرحله از استاد یا همکلاسی‌هایتان درباره محتوای نوشته خود راهنمایی گرفتید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
14	د- (Editing): پیش از ارائه کارس تا چه حد به ویرایش نوشته‌تان از لحاظ گرامر و ساختار پرداختید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
15	- تا چه حد به ویرایش نوشته‌تان از لحاظ املائی کلمات پرداختید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
16	- تا چه حد به ویرایش نوشته‌تان از لحاظ علائم سجاوندی پرداختید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
17	- آیا در این مرحله درباره فرم و ساختار نوشته‌تان از استاد راهنمایی گرفتید؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
18	ه- (Publishing): - آیا پس از اتمام کار آن را در کلاس ارائه دادید؟ (مثلاً اینکه از شما خواسته شود کارتان را برای کل کلاس یا یکی از همکلاسی‌هایتان بلند بخوانید)	۰	۲	۴	۶
19	- آیا نظر و برخورد استادتان از کل کار انگیزه‌بخش بود؟	۰	۲	۴	۶
20	* پروژه انجام تمرین تا چه حد خارج از محیط کلاس انجام شد (مثلاً کتابخانه یا آزمایشگاه زبان)؟	۰	۲	۴	۶

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