

Enhancing Iranian EFL Learners' Descriptive Writing Skill through Genre-based Instruction and Metalinguistic Feedback

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) writing practitioners have long attempted to improve EFL/ESL learners' competence in writing with recourse to either instruction or feedback. Likewise, researchers have, to date, mainly focused on either of these treatments to enhance language learners' composing ability. Which treatment leads to more significant improvements is, however, unclear. Moreover, of the various written genres, the genre of description seems to have been neglected by researchers. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the impact of metalinguistic feedback and scaffolded genre-based instruction through consciousness-raising tasks on EFL learners' ability to write descriptive essays. To this aim, two groups, feedback group (n = 32) and instruction group (n = 32), participated in the present study. After pretesting the participants' ability to compose descriptive essays, the researchers provided them with either written metalinguistic explanations on their compositions or genre-based instruction. The participants then took a posttest, the results of which revealed that the instruction group had made more significant improvements.

Keywords: EFL descriptive writing, metalinguistic feedback, genre-based instruction, scaffolding, consciousness-raising

EFL/ESL Writing Pedagogy and Genre-based Instruction

The status of writing within the field of English language teaching has considerably changed in the past 60 years (Richards, 2002). The quantitative

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and qualitative growth of composition studies has transformed the realm of writing instruction. As a result of this transformation, writing is deemed to be a complex, recursive process, including various operations which are essential to the process of writing. Tracing how instructional approaches to writing have developed over the years, one can observe that the early 1960s was marked by the prevalence of a product approach, which was followed by a controlled composition model in the mid-1970s, the paragraph-pattern approach in the 1980s, and the process approach in the early 1990s. The recent past, in turn, has witnessed the emergence of a genre-based approach to EFL/ESL writing instruction.

To date, a considerable number of studies (e.g., Ahn, 2012; Carstens, 2009; Chaisiri, 2010; Crossly, 2007; Elashri, 2013; Henry & Roseberry, 1999, 2001; Hyland, 2007; Lee, 2012; Liu, 2012; Luo & Huong, 2015; Na, 2004; Nueva, 2010; Reppen, 2002; Ting, Campbell, Law, & Poh, 2013; Troyan, 2013) investigating the nature and effectiveness of genre-based analyses and pedagogies have been conducted. A large proportion of these studies (e.g., Liu, 2012; Luo & Huong, 2015) probed into genre analysis as a way of revealing recurring patterns, structures, and moves currently found in certain genres. Furthermore, a number of these studies (e.g., Nueva, 2010; Reppen, 2002; Ting, Campbell, Law, & Poh, 2013) engaged their participants in writing instruction which specifically concentrated on the teaching of generic features of certain genres. As well as genre-related features, some of these studies (e.g., Carstens, 2009; Henry & Roseberry, 1999, 2001; Na, 2004) focused their attention on the explicit teaching of generic moves. In addition to the above, some of these studies (Ahn, 2012; Elashri, 2013; Reppen, 2002) also paid close attention to familiarizing learners with such concepts as purposes of specific genres, particular audiences of the given genre, and the outcomes of writing in a certain genre. As enlightening as these studies have appeared to be for ELT researchers and practitioners, the literature does not seem to include any studies that attempt to complement genre-based instructional practices with other educational conditions, thereby improving the outcomes of instruction. Two of these conditions are scaffolding and consciousness-raising that may render the genre-based pedagogy more efficient and effective.

Sociocultural Perspectives on English Language Teaching

The social turn in linguistics first began to take root during the 1920s and early 1930s when Vygotsky was active in researching and theorizing child development. Vygotsky's writings, nonetheless, were not widely promulgated and were not published in English until 1962. His posthumous book published in this year was entitled *Thought and Language*. The book was republished as *Thinking and Speech: Vygotsky* in 1987. More recently, neo-Vygotskian theorists (e.g., Lantolf, 2000, 2011; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf & Poehner, 2013; Poehner, 2012; Swain, 2010; Swain, Kinner, & Steinman, 2011; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Thorne & Lantolf, 2006) have modified Vygotsky's original ideas and made them more applicable and relevant to the domain of foreign/second language learning. In the core of sociocultural theorists' beliefs lie such concepts as language mediation and mediated learning, private, inner, and social speech in language learning, regulation, activity theory, microgenesis, and, more importantly, scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development. Of these, scaffolding seems to have received special attention on the part of educationists and researchers.

Viewed from the perspective of L2 learning, scaffolding refers to "the process of supportive dialogue which directs the attention of the learner to key features of the environment, and which prompts them through successive steps of a problem" (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013, p.222). Likewise, Hyland (2009) defines scaffolding as "a metaphor of learning which relates to those supportive behaviors by which an expert can help a novice learner to gradually achieve higher, independent levels of performance" (p. 209). As with other language learning techniques and conditions, for scaffolding to be realized, certain features have to be present in the teaching/learning process. Daniels (2007) enumerates these features as follows

1. The recruitment by an adult of a [learner's] involvement in a meaningful and culturally desirable activity beyond the [learner's] current understanding or control;
2. The titration of the assistance provided using a process of "online diagnosis" of the learner's understanding and skill level and the estimation of the amount of support required;
3. The support is not a uniform prescription—it may vary in mode (e.g., physical gesture, verbal prompt, extensive dialogue)

as well as in amount; 4. The support provided is gradually withdrawn as control over the task is transferred to the learner. (p. 323)

Consciousness-Raising Instruction

Coined and first explained by Sharwood Smith (1981), consciousness-raising has proved to be a complex, multi-faceted concept by characteristic. In keeping with this, Ellis (1993) maintains that “the term ... consciousness-raising is rather vague and is used with very different meanings” (p. 4). Therefore, providing an agreed-upon definition for this type of instruction involves taking account of a myriad of aspects. Thus far, a number of definitions and conceptualizations of the concept (Ellis, 1997, 2002, 2010; Rose, 1994; Sharwood Smith, 1981) have been proposed. For example, Ellis (1997) defines a consciousness-raising task as

a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the target language. (p. 160)

In other words, consciousness-raising tends to encourage learners, with the teacher's help, to attempt to discover a specific grammar rule and learn about it for themselves. The ultimate aim of such instruction is to help learners construct their own explicit grammar. Therefore, “Consciousness-raising involves an attempt to equip the learner with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature—to develop declarative rather than procedural knowledge of it” (Ellis, 2002, p. 168). Ellis (2010) states that there are three tenets which underlie the common practice of consciousness-raising. First is the provision of L2 data which includes the targeted feature. The second tenet of consciousness-raising is the attempt, on the part of the teacher, to isolate particular linguistic features for learners' focused attention. In other words, from the pool of textual data, certain features, to which it is attempted to draw the learners' attention, are identified. The third and final tenet underlying consciousness-raising is the requiring of the learner to exert intellectual effort leading to the formation of hypotheses about how the targeted feature actually works.

The related literature features several research studies (e.g., Alcon Soler, 2007; Derakhshan & Eslami, 2015; Narita, 2012; Nitta & Gardner, 2005; Hendricks, 2010) which have applied the principles of consciousness-raising instruction to enhance language teaching/learning practices. Most of these applications have been made in order to enhance the instruction of grammar or pragmatics. As such, the employment of consciousness-raising tasks to improve the teaching/learning of writing has not been widely practiced, hence the necessity to conduct a study to examine whether this form of instruction can benefit EFL/ESL writing.

Written Feedback in English Language Teaching

Similar to approaches to writing instruction that have received special attention, written corrective feedback, which can play an important role in enhancing the quality of EFL/ESL learners' written products, has captured the attention of various scholars. Despite the plethora of research conducted in this domain, there is still controversy regarding which feedback type can better serve teaching/learning purposes. Furthermore, the literature does not conclusively demonstrate whether or not the practice of providing written corrective feedback on language learners' essays positively affects the quality of these written products. More specifically, the related literature includes, on the one hand, studies (e.g., Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2004; Vengadasamy, 2002) that deem written corrective feedback ineffective and even harmful, and, on the other hand, studies (Binglan & Jia, 2010; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2015; Bitchener & Storch, 2015; Chandler, 2003; Ellis, 2009a, 2009b; Ferris, 2004, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Sheen, 2007; Vyatkina, 2011;) that support the employment of written feedback in order to enhance EFL/ESL writing.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Despite the considerable number of studies which have investigated the impact of various approaches to writing instruction on the quality of EFL/ESL essays and those studies that have attempted to shed light on the effects of written feedback on language learners' ability to write essays of various types, to the researchers' best knowledge, no study has specifically aimed to probe

into the comparative effects of scaffolded writing instruction, relying on consciousness-raising, and written feedback on English language learners' writing ability. Put in other words, the literature does not clearly indicate which treatment (i.e., writing instruction or written feedback) better improves EFL/ESL writing. Therefore, it seemed necessary to carry out a study which intended to compare the effects of these two treatments on EFL learners' competence in writing descriptive essays. To this end, the researchers raised the following questions:

1. Are there any statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest descriptive writing performance of the participants receiving scaffolded genre-based instruction through consciousness-raising tasks?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest descriptive writing performance of the participants receiving metalinguistic written feedback on their essays?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences between the descriptive writing performance of the participants receiving scaffolded genre-based instruction through consciousness-raising tasks and that of the participants receiving metalinguistic written feedback on their essays?

Method

Participants

In the course of this study, the teacher-researchers taught 6 EFL classes. These classes were selected through convenience sampling and consisted of 64 learners who had all successfully passed the upper-intermediate level and who were studying at the advanced level of language proficiency in the Kish Institute of Science and Technology. Put differently, all these learners were at Advanced One. These learners were all male adults and were all learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, the great majority of these learners had Persian as their mother tongue, and only a marginal minority spoke languages other than Persian (i.e., either Azeri or Kurdish) as their first language. The classes under investigation lasted for a period of 5 weeks.

Instruments and Materials

The present study used the following as instruments and materials: 1) deductive consciousness-raising tasks; 2) inductive consciousness-raising tasks; written English tests; 3) and 4) the Analytic Rating Scale for EFL Descriptive Writing.

Deductive consciousness-raising tasks. One set of deductive tasks, which had as their aim the raising of the participants' consciousness as to the unique generic elements of the genre of description, was designed. The tasks all included at least a model text and a number of following questions or activities. An example task can be viewed in Appendix A.

Inductive consciousness-raising tasks. Similar to the deductive consciousness-raising tasks, four other tasks were designed to be employed in an attempt to make the participants more aware of the salient elements of the genre of description. These tasks, however, were inductive, as opposed to the previous set, in that they did not provide the learners with any rules or generalizations about descriptive essays but rather required them to formulate hypotheses and discover the rules and generalizations on their own. The tasks all included at least one model and a number of activities or questions (see Appendix B for an example).

Written English tests. Two written English tests were prepared. One of these tests fulfilled the pretest goals and the other test served the posttest purposes. The prompts of these tests had three main parts. The first part included the time limit of the test. The second part included the topic on which the test-takers had to write, and the third part showed in how many words the essays had to be composed. To avoid practice effects, the researchers selected two different topics for the tests (see Appendix C).

Analytic rating scale for EFL descriptive writing. This scale was used to score the pretest and posttest essays of the participants. Note should be taken of the fact that in order to develop this scale, the researchers had conducted a three-strand mixed methods study prior to the present investigation. Composed of one quantitative and two qualitative strands, this mixed study factor-analyzed 172 ELT experts' analyses of the genre of description, and it content-analyzed 20 authentic and 30 inauthentic descriptive texts. Resulting from two meta-inferences made in the course of

this earlier study, the Analytic Rating Scale for EFL Descriptive Writing was constructed. Basically, the researchers used factor analysis in the first strand of this mixed-methods study in order to guarantee that the resulting scale would possess acceptable construct validity (Williams, Onsman, & Brown, 2010).

Procedure and Design

As the participants of the study were selected through convenience sampling, they did not undergo random selection. Therefore, to counteract the possible negative effects of this non-random selection on the validity of the findings, the teacher-researchers randomly assigned the six intact classes to either of the two experimental groups. This random assignment resulted in the first experimental group, the genre-based instruction group, to be composed of 32 learners and the second experimental group, the metalinguistic written feedback group, to also consist of 32 learners.

To make sure the participants in the two groups did not possess significantly different abilities in terms of composing descriptive essays, the researchers gave them a pretest in the second session of the term. The prompt of this writing test asked them to describe the most picturesque landscape they had ever seen in their lives. They were required to write on the topic using between 150 and 175 words within a time limit of 30 minutes. After taking the pretest, the participants received different treatments depending on which group they belonged to.

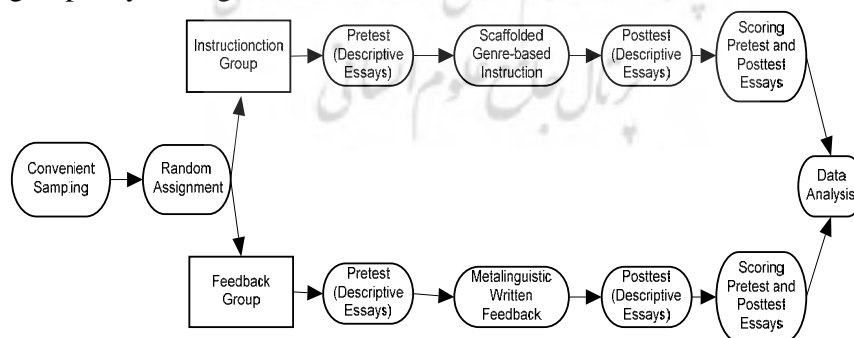


Figure 1. Design and featured components of the study

Drawing upon the model of genre-based writing pedagogy proposed by Hyland (2003), this experimental study offered the first group instruction on

the genre of description through scaffolding. More specifically, scaffolding was practiced throughout the study at two stages. The first stage, the modeling stage, involved discussing and analyzing descriptive texts, their particular purposes and structure, and their unique language features. The discussion and analysis experienced at this stage was practiced through scaffolded consciousness-raising instruction aimed at the development of a metalanguage closely focused on the genre of description. This instruction, centering on modeling this genre, was, therefore, characterized by two essential components, namely, scaffolding and consciousness-raising.

Scaffolding during the modeling stage was realized in keeping with the premises and guidelines initially laid out by Vygotsky and subsequently expanded by his followers, neo-Vygotskian socioculturalists. Complying with these guidelines, the teacher-researchers made provisions for genre-based instruction on descriptive writing to be given through active teacher-led intervention and assistance. This assistance was gradually removed as learners became familiar with the instructional techniques as well as with the various aspects of the genre of description. The aim of the procedure was to help the learners "to progress from the role of active observers to autonomous learners" (Reppen, 2002, p. 322). During this stage, consciousness-raising tasks, designed in line with Ellis (2002) and Mohamed (2004), were used as a means of instruction. These tasks took the form of either deductive or inductive tasks. The former type, deductive consciousness-raising tasks, involved learners in listening to explanations given by the teacher about the generic features and elements of descriptive texts. In other words, the explanations basically focused on the unique features and aspects of description and the learners' attention was also drawn to the differences between the genre of description and other writing genres. After these explanations were given, the learners then looked at descriptive texts provided by the teacher-researchers and responded to some questions raised by them. Next, they applied their knowledge to do some related exercises. These exercises included answering questions, analyzing texts, and searching for particular generic elements found in model texts.

The second type of consciousness-raising tasks adopted an inductive approach to raising consciousness about the genre-related features of

description. Essentially, these tasks involved learners in working on samples of descriptive texts and doing exercises which focused on the unique features of this genre. Completing tables with information extracted from sample texts and answering questions about the various generic aspects and features were among these exercises. Note should be taken of the fact that this part of the instruction relied and built upon what the participants had previously learnt through the deductive component about how descriptive texts are written. Doing these exercises guaranteed that recycling was present in the course and that the learners had more opportunities to practice writing descriptive essays autonomously, with a minimum level of assistance offered by the teacher.

After completing the first stage, which targeted modeling of descriptive essays, the researchers began the second stage, the composition stage. As with the first stage, participants experienced scaffolded instruction at the stage of joint and independent construction of texts. It should be noted that whereas the first stage was marked by the heavy intervention of the teacher-researchers and the absence of production on the part of the learners, the second stage was characterized by lower degrees of teacher intervention as well as by learner production, i.e., learners' composing descriptive essays. Initially, composition was practiced through the joint efforts of learners drafting texts in groups of three or four under the supervision of the teacher who provided them with assistance when and where it was called for. The teacher mainly assisted the learners in their choice of structures and vocabulary as well as in terms of the content to include and the way of organizing this content in the essay. In the course of the study, these learners jointly constructed two essays which they handed in to the teacher. The teacher then read the texts to the class and commented on the strengths and weaknesses of them. The comments all addressed the genre of description and its related and specific features, patterns, and structures.

The last step in the second stage involved the learners' in the construction of a descriptive essay composed independently of the teacher and their peers. This composition occurred only once during the study and was completed in the class, with the learners' working on their essays by themselves. As such, the teacher-researchers did not intervene in the composition process and their assistance was completely removed. In total, eight sessions, each lasting

approximately thirty minutes, were devoted to providing this group with genre-based instruction. The first four sessions were spent modeling descriptive texts through deductive and inductive consciousness-raising. The second four sessions were devoted to the second stage of genre-based pedagogy—joint and independent construction of descriptive essays, thereby ensuring appropriate scaffolding throughout the process of instruction.

On the other hand, the second experimental group in this study received no explicit instruction on writing. Instead, this group was provided with written feedback on their descriptive essays in keeping with Ellis (2009b). In so doing, the researchers first gave these participants a topic. Next, the learners wrote on the topic out of class. Topics were chosen such that they would elicit descriptions. One of the topics, for example, asked them to describe a person they particularly liked/admired. The other topics, likewise, required them to compose descriptive essays about places, things, or people. After writing the essays, the learners handed in their products and the researchers then provided the learners with feedback taking the form of comments and corrections which concentrated the learners' attention on the unique features of description. As a case in point, when a product lacked organization, the researchers commented at the bottom of the paper that descriptions should follow space order and should depict a place, person, or thing starting from top and moving downwards, or moving from left side to right side, or from far to near, or from outside to inside. During the study, these participants composed three descriptive essays on three different topics, assigned by the researchers. Metalinguistic written feedback, in the case of all the three essays, was provided to these participants.

An important consideration was to ensure that the participants, having been supplied with feedback in the form of metalinguistic comments and suggestions, spent some time reflecting on the areas which needed to be improved. To this aim, the researchers offered them an incentive acting as a way of motivating them to carefully study the feedback, examine their products, and revise them accordingly. The teacher-researchers encouraged the participants to read their comments and suggestions, to implement them in their products, and to deliver their polished descriptive essays to them before the next topic was given. If they did so, they could get a 10-percent

increase in their final term scores. The offering of this incentive appeared motivating enough to these learners as the vast majority of them, i.e., approximately ninety percent of them, returned their revised products to the teacher-researchers who, after making sure the revised versions were not exact copies of the original versions, returned them back to the participants.

Once the teacher-researchers had taught the participants in the first group how to write descriptive essays and had provided metalinguistic written feedback on the descriptive essays of the second group, participants in both groups sat for a posttest which was similar in almost all respects to the pretest. The writing test took place in the final session of the course and required the learners to compose a descriptive essay using between 150 and 175 words. The time set for this test was 30 minutes. However, this test was different to the pretest in one respect and that was the topic. In order to avoid practice effects to adversely influence the results, the researchers assigned another topic which asked the learners to write about a national and/or religious occasion commonly celebrated among Iranians.

Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions raised at the beginning of the study, the researchers first computed the descriptive statistics belonging to the two groups. Next, in order to determine whether or not the two groups made significant improvements in the course of the study, paired-samples *t*-tests were run on the results of the pretests and posttests. Subsequent to this and in an attempt to investigate whether or not there were any significant differences between the two groups prior to the treatment stage, the researchers administered an independent-samples *t*-test on the results of the pretest. Finally, to determine which group performed significantly better on the posttest, the researchers ran another independent-samples *t*-test on the scores of the descriptive written English posttest. Prior to this analysis, however, it was necessary to examine inter-rater reliability of the pretest and posttest scores. Therefore, the pretest and posttest scores, given to the essays by two independent expert teachers/researchers acting as raters, were subjected to Pearson product moment correlation (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Pretest Inter-rater Correlation Coefficients

Subscale	Inter-rater correlation coefficient	
	Feedback group	Instruction group
Genre-related elements	.89	.86
Language-related elements	.85	.94
Content and organization	.84	.93
Mechanics	.92	.92

As the table above shows, the correlation coefficients all exceeded the value 0.8, which was indicative of the fact that the raters' scores given to the pretest essays were highly reliable. A similar analysis, in turn, was conducted to determine the inter-rater reliability of the posttest scores.

Table 2
Posttest Inter-rater Correlation Coefficients

Subscale	Inter-rater correlation coefficient	
	Feedback group	Instruction group
Genre-related Elements	.81	.93
Language-related Elements	.88	.97
Content and Organization	.86	.87
Mechanics	.76	.91

As with the results of the pretest, the posttest scores given by the two raters proved to be highly reliable. As can be viewed in Table 2, the lowest correlation coefficient was computed to be 0.76 and the highest coefficient was calculated to be 0.97. As such, all these coefficients lay within a range that indicated high enough inter-rater reliability. The next step involved running paired-samples *t*-tests on the results of the pretest and posttest. The following table displays pretest and posttest results of the instruction group. It should be noted that these scores represent the average scores calculated by averaging the two scores given to each essay by the two raters.

Table 3

Instruction Group's Pretest and Posttest Descriptive Statistics

Subscale	Number of participants	Pretest mean score	Posttest mean score
Genre-related Elements	32	13.27	27.05
Language-related Elements	32	14.86	17.93
Content and Organization	32	10.86	16.49
Mechanics	32	10.44	13.90

As the results indicate, the participants in the instruction group made improvements in terms of the four elements of their essays. However, it should be stated that although improvements were observed in all these elements, the most striking progress was made in terms of Genre-related Elements, with its mean gain being 13.78. The second most noticeable improvement was made in terms of Content and Organization. The mean gained in this relation was 5.63. The two lowest gains were those representing Mechanics and Language-related Elements. The latter witnessed a mean gain of 3.07 and the former observed a mean gain of 3.46. As such, the learners in this group made the least striking progress in terms of their knowledge and ability to use Language-related Elements. To run a paired-samples *t*-test on these results, the researchers computed the total scores and next carried out the analysis. What follows is Table 4 which incorporates the descriptive figures belonging to the instruction group

Table 4

Instruction Group's Total Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	49.42	32	6.07	1.07
Posttest	75.35	32	6.30	1.11

As is clear in the table above, there was a considerable difference between the results of the pretest and those of the posttest. To investigate whether or not this difference was statistically significant, the researchers ran

a paired-samples *t*-test on the mean scores (see Table 5 below for the results of the *t*-test).

Table 5
Paired-samples T-test on Instruction Group's Mean Scores

	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pretest	-25.92	3.86	.68	38.02	31	.000
Posttest						

The difference between the two mean scores was 25.92 and the *t*-value was 38.02. As the Sig. (2-tailed) was lower than the critical value of 0.05, the test proved that the difference between the two mean scores was statistically significant. Next, the same analyses were conducted on the results of the feedback group. The table below displays the corresponding descriptive statistics.

Table 6
Feedback Group's Pretest and Posttest Descriptive Statistics

Subscale	Number of participants	Pretest mean score	Posttest mean score
Genre-related Elements	32	12.64	15.83
Language-related Elements	32	14.47	18.42
Content and Organization	32	11.50	15.95
Mechanics	32	10.28	13.03

As is evident in Table 6, the four components of the feedback group's descriptive essays noticeably improved in the course of this study. The mean score for Genre-related Elements progressed from 12.64 to 15.83, with the respective mean gain being 3.19, whereas that for Language-related Elements progressed from 14.47 to 18.42. The mean gain for this component was, thus, 3.95. The mean gain for Content and Organization and that of Mechanics were

computed to be 5.45 and 2.75. As such, the most significant improvement was made in relation to Content and Organization, while the least noticeable progress was made in terms of Mechanics. To determine any statistically significant improvements, nevertheless, the researchers calculated the respective total scores.

Table 7

Feedback Group's Total Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	48.89	32	4.86	0.86
Posttest	63.23	32	4.85	0.86

The mean gain for the feedback group's total scores was 14.34. To examine whether or not this difference between the pretest and posttest results of the feedback group was significant, the researchers ran a paired-samples *t*-test on these results.

Table 8

Paired-samples T-test on Feedback Group's Mean Scores

	Paired Differences			<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pretest Posttest	-14.34	4.13	.73	19.67	31	.000

The difference between the two mean scores, as was previously stated, was 14.34 and the *t*-value was 19.67. Since the Sig. (2-tailed) was lower than the critical value of 0.05, this statistical measure revealed that the difference between the two mean scores was statistically significant. Thus, it was proved that the participants in the feedback group made statistically significant improvements.

Next, the researchers intended to investigate whether there existed any statistically significant differences between the performances of the two groups on the pretest. The pretest mean score belonging to the instruction

group (i.e., 49.42) and that of the feedback group (i.e., 48.89), differed, albeit marginally, from one another. To determine whether or not this difference was significant, the researchers administered an independent-samples *t*-test. The results of this test ($t = 0.387$, $df = 62$, $p > 0.05$) proved that there was no statistically significant difference between the ability levels of the two groups at the outset of the study.

Similarly, in order to determine any statistically significant differences between the posttest results, the researchers ran another independent-samples *t*-test on the related mean scores. The mean score difference between the two figures (that is, the instruction groups' mean score, i.e., 75.34, and that of the feedback group, i.e., 63.23) was calculated to be 12.11, which was an apparently considerable difference. However, it was necessary to examine whether this difference was statistically significant. This examination was conducted through running an independent-samples *t*-test. The results of the *t*-test ($t = 8.611$, $df = 62$, $p < 0.001$) proved that there was a statistically significant difference between the ability levels of the two groups at the end of the study. In other words, this statistical test revealed that the instruction group outperformed the feedback group.

Results and Discussion

The present study attempted to seek answers to three questions, which are restated, answered, and discussed below.

Are there any statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest descriptive writing performance of the participants receiving scaffolded genre-based instruction through consciousness-raising tasks?

Based on the results of the statistical test ($t = 38.02$, $df = 31$, $p < 0.001$), it was proved that the participants in the instruction group had made statistically significant improvements in the course of this study. The answer to this question is, thus, positive. Regarding the components of the descriptive essays of this group, one can easily notice the striking improvements in Genre-related Elements compared to the three other components; the mean gain for this component was 13.78. The second most striking improvement with a mean gain of 5.63 was made in terms of Content and Organization.

Language-related Elements and Mechanics were enhanced nearly equally, with their mean gains being 3.07 and 3.40, respectively. That Genre-related Elements and Content and Organization obtained the most noticeable improvements revealed the fact that genre-based instruction which is scaffolded and which is coupled with consciousness-raising instruction can help language learners enhance their competence more markedly in areas directly related to the genre in question. In other words, the results showed that Language-related Elements and the mechanics of writing are either less amenable to enhancement through genre-based instruction or that it takes language learners more time to enhance their ability to correctly and appropriately use them

The fact that the instruction group gained more marked improvements can in part be attributed to the active, sustained engagement the participants had with their teacher, with their peers, and hence with the concepts in question. These results are in line with those obtained by Tuan (2011) who proved that genre-based instruction could positively impact the ability of Vietnamese learners of English to compose recounts. Moreover, the findings of this study corroborate those of Martin-Martin (2013) who showed that writing pedagogy which draws on the principles of genre-based instruction can facilitate the process of learning to writing. Recommending a wider application of this approach to writing, Martin-Martin maintains that one of the foci of such instruction “should be the explicit teaching of functions and language structures of typical academic texts” (p. 329).

Furthermore, scaffolding, an inherent element of the instruction this group received, played a crucial role in helping the learners improve their ability over time. In other words, the fact that these participants were first gradually familiarized with the genre of description, were next required to compose descriptive essays in groups, and were finally asked to write such essays on their own helped them boost their competence. Regarding this component, one can observe that the findings this study arrived at are corroborated by those obtained by Read (2010) who advocates the employment of scaffolding as a viable condition which can help language learners and teachers to better achieve their intended purposes. Closely addressing the applicability of scaffolding in the context of genre-based

writing, Read holds that “using modeling and joint production of texts, teachers support students as apprentices in writing” (p. 3). Furthermore, citing scholars in this regard, Read states that “Social learning theory ... suggests that we learn best when learning is situated in a context in which students interact with each other and the teacher in meaningful, purposeful ways” (p. 3).

A further built-in, integral element of the instruction provided to this group was consciousness-raising. The types of tasks, that is, deductive and inductive tasks, and the variety of aspects which they drew the attention of the participants to appeared to contribute to the learners' gradual and marked improvement. The fact that consciousness-raising can benefit language learners in various ways when it comes to learning to write is supported by a considerable number of scholars, among whom one can mention Hyland (2007). Hyland asserts that one of the advantages of genre-based pedagogy is that it can create the necessary conditions for consciousness-raising to result. The results of this study also resonate with Djiwandono (2011) who through engaging Indonesian learners of English in consciousness-raising instruction helped them enhance their ability to write business letters, notes, and memos. Djiwandono proved that the noticing which results as a consequence of exposing learners to consciousness-raising exercises and/or tasks is one of the main drivers of success in improving one's ability to write in various genres.

Are there any statistically significant differences between the pretest and posttest descriptive writing performance of the participants receiving metalinguistic written feedback on their essays?

The results of the *t*-test ($t = 19.67$, $df = 31$, $p < 0.001$) indicated that the participants in the feedback group had made statistically significant progress during this study. The answer to this question is, therefore, positive. With respect to the improvements this group made, it can be observed that the components constituting the descriptive essays were enhanced more uniformly compared to the instruction group; that is, the four components witnessed similar improvements. The mean gains for the Genre-related Elements, Content and Organization, Language-related Elements, and Mechanics were computed to be 3.19, 4.45, 3.95, and 2.75, respectively.

Therefore, it appears that metalinguistic feedback provided to this group had similar positive effects on these various components.

The improvements the feedback group made can be ascribed to the main element of the treatment, metalinguistic written feedback, provided to this group. Concerning written feedback, this study lends credence to Ebadi (2014) who showed that focused metalinguistic feedback can have a great potential for enhancing Iranian EFL learners' ability to write more grammatically accurate essays. Similarly, the results of this study are in line with those reported by Mohammadi (2009), in that both studies indicate that feedback provided to EFL learners through metalinguistic comments and explanations can significantly improve the outcomes of the process of teaching/learning writing.

Are there any statistically significant differences between the descriptive writing performance of the participants receiving scaffolded genre-based instruction through consciousness-raising tasks and that of the participants receiving metalinguistic written feedback on their essays?

To answer this question, the researchers ran an independent-samples *t*-test on the post-test scores, the results of which ($t = 8.611$, $df = 62$, $p < 0.001$) revealed the superiority of the instruction group. Similar to the first two questions, therefore, the answer to this question is positive. As such, this study proved that scaffolded, consciousness-raising-driven genre-based instruction can, in comparison with metalinguistic feedback, more effectively enhance EFL learners' ability to compose descriptive essays.

Conclusions

The findings of the present study revealed that both genre-based instruction, which is scaffolded and which relies upon consciousness-raising, and metalinguistic written feedback can help EFL learners acquire the necessary skills to compose more high-quality descriptive essays. With respect to these findings, a number of pedagogical implications can be discussed. First and foremost, as this research study proved the efficacy of genre-based instruction in boosting the quality of EFL descriptive writing, it is recommended that this practice be applied to teach language learners other

writing genres, such as reports, summaries, and letters of various types. This instruction should be scaffolded and it should benefit from both deductive and inductive consciousness-raising tasks. Another pedagogical implication is related to spoken genres, among which one can enumerate lectures, debates, job interviews, friendly chats, and formal transactions. It follows that similar to the genres of writing, spoken genres can, in all likelihood, benefit from this synergistically complemented instruction.

With respect to the second experimental group which was provided with metalinguistic written feedback on their essays, this study proved that written explanations and comments can considerably facilitate and enhance the quality of EFL descriptive writing. Therefore, it is recommended that the practice of providing metalinguistic feedback on language learners' essays be extended to other genres of writing, such as reports, job application letters, thank-you notes, letters of complaint, and summaries. Moreover, as the present study indicated the effectiveness of providing metalinguistic feedback on learners' written products, it is argued that the act of familiarizing language learners with metalanguage and providing them with metalinguistic explanations and comments render learning more efficient and purposeful. Given this increase in efficiency and purposefulness, it is advised that this way of giving feedback also be practiced in the context of teaching and learning speaking. Since it is output-prompting, rather than input-providing as in the case of direct feedback or recasting, metalinguistic feedback can play a crucial role in the process of improving language learners' interlanguages. In other words, because of the nature of metalinguistic feedback, this is, raising learners' awareness of certain features and requiring them to modify or correct their slips or errors, this way of providing feedback can potentially enhance language learners' ability to speak better.

Given the limitations imposed upon this study, as illuminating as the findings of it appear to be, they should be considered with caution. First of all, this study was limited in that the two experimental groups were composed of relatively small samples of participants selected through convenience sampling, which is a non-random type of sampling. Therefore, generalizations of the findings to other contexts should be made with care. Secondly, this study did not include a delayed posttest, the fact of which made it impossible

to examine long-term effects of the treatments on the participants' ability to write descriptions. Finally, it should be remembered that the instructional approach and the feedback type this study relied on were genre-based pedagogy and metalinguistic feedback. As such, other approaches to writing instruction and other types of written feedback were not researched. Therefore, making definitive conclusions about the role of writing instruction or written feedback on the quality of foreign/second language writing is not warranted.

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Appendix A

Example Deductive Consciousness-raising Task

Focus: descriptive/vivid, concrete details, present tenses, prepositional phrases

Supai Village

The trail to Supai Village is hot and dusty. You can hike the trail, or you can hire a guide to take you on horseback. **Along the trail**, you see only rock, sand, and an occasional lizard. It is very dry, for this is a desert country. There is no water on the trail, nor is there any shade. As you enter the village, you pass **by several small homes**. It is a quiet place. **Dogs sleep in the streets**, and **villagers stand in their doorways** and silently watch you, a stranger, pass by. They aren't smiling, yet they don't seem unfriendly. **In the center of the village**, there is a small hotel, a restaurant, a general store, and a post office. **At the opposite end of the village**, the trail leads **to a cliff overlooking the canyon below**.

Now, read the text more carefully a second time. What do the underlined phrases or clauses in blue show? What about the phrases in red?

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Appendix B

Example Inductive Consciousness-raising Task

My first car

My first car was old and ugly, but I loved it anyway. Its main paint color was black, but it also had blue, green, yellow, and white paint in different places. The body was in terrible condition. It had several big dents. The lock on the hood was broken, so I had to tie it down with a strong rope. Also, the back bumper was rusty, and the front window was cracked. The inside of the car was also in terrible condition. The passenger door handle was missing, so you couldn't open the passenger door from the inside. The seats had at least ten large holes in them. Also, the gas gauge was broken. It always showed "full," so I often ran out of gas. The speedometer was broken, too, and consequently I never knew how fast I was driving. Like a first love, my old VW had a few faults, but in my mind it was perfect.

Fill in the gaps in the incomplete text below.

The above paragraph is a ... text. Descriptive texts aim to clearly depict people, places, situations, events, and things. The main aim of the writer is to describe what he/she has heard, seen, smelt, tasted, and touched so that the reader can feel the same way. Descriptive paragraphs therefore include concrete ... and they make use of vivid More specifically, descriptions are written so that they rely on the five These texts, moreover, tend to follow a ... order, that is, the description moves from inside to outside or vice versa, from far to near or vice versa, from right to left or vice versa, and so forth. Last but not least is the fact that the tense descriptive texts use most frequently is the

Appendix C
Written English Tests

Topic 1 (Pretest)

You should spend about 30 minutes to write on this topic.

Describe in detail the most memorable and picturesque landscape you have ever seen.

Write between 150 and 175 words.

Topic 2 (Posttest)

You should spend about 30 minutes to write on this topic.

Describe in detail one of the most valued national and/or religious occasions which Iranian people commonly celebrate each year.

Write between 150 and 175 words.

