

Impact of Dynamic Assessment on Iranian EFL Learners' Picture-cued Writing

Raheleh Taheri*, M.A. Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch, Shahreza, Iran
raheleh.taheri85@gmail.com

Hossein Vahid Dastjerdi, Associate Professor, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza Branch,
Shahreza, Iran
h_vahid@yahoo.com

Abstract

In Iran, most English teachers' method of teaching writing is merely to have students do some writing exercises or simply to give them writing tests without any instruction, but writing is not an easy task for students, and teachers should be able to do more to facilitate their students' writing. One of the ways to aid writing is dynamic assessment via graduated prompt. The graduated prompting procedure provides intervention in the form of predetermined standardized prompts that are sequenced from general to more specific. The present study aimed at investigating the effect of DA on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' picture-cued writing tasks. The study was conducted with 35 Iranian EFL learners (male and female) who were randomly selected from an available population pool of 70 EFL learners enrolled in two language institutes in Esfahan, Iran. The data were collected via a pretest, a posttest and a questionnaire. The analysis of the test scores through t-test revealed that the experimental group did statistically better in the test. Furthermore, almost all of the participants held positive attitudes toward writing, and their confidence in their own English writing ability increased. The implication of the study is that dynamic assessment via graduated prompt can be incorporated into the regular writing program.

Key words: dynamic assessment, graduated prompting procedure, picture-cued writing task

Introduction

In second/foreign language programs, there has been a long tradition of standardized testing as the most dominant and user-friendly procedure to assess the students' language proficiency levels for such diverse goals as diagnostic, placement and selection (Shabani, 2012). Traditionally, assessment is benignly described as an information-gathering activity (Bailey, 1996 cited in Poehner, 2008). The growth of terms such as "teaching to the test," "narrowing of the curriculum" and "assessment-driven instruction" suggests that assessment is seen as an activity that is distinct from, and perhaps even at odds with, the goals of teaching (Linn, 2000).

Dynamic Assessment (DA) challenges conventional views on teaching and assessment by arguing that these should not be seen as separate activities but should instead be fully integrated. As Poehner (2008, p. 1) puts it Dynamic Assessment proceeds from an ontological perspective on human abilities developed more than 80 years ago by the renowned Russian psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky. Vygotsky's research into the development of cognitive functions revealed that this process is not a matter of innate abilities growing into a mature state but that it is the emergence of new ways of thinking, acting, and being that result from an individual's engagement in activities where he or she is supported by cultural artifacts and by interactions with others (Poehner, 2008).

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Poehner, 2008) defined the difference between individuals' unassisted and assisted performance as their *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), stating that the level of performance they are able to reach presently with assistance is indicative of their future unassisted performance. In order to have a complete picture of individuals' abilities, it is necessary to collaborate with them during the completion of assessment tasks, extending independent performance to levels they could not reach alone.

The researcher in this study is interested to investigate the effect of DA on writing ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The researcher tries to find out the effects of graduated prompting procedure of DA on the achievement of the learners in picture-cued writing tasks focusing on how the learners would respond to intervention.

Traditionally, written language has been measured by standardized tests that focus primarily on the products of writing. The mechanics of writing which includes handwriting, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation are emphasized. This focus on mechanical skills leads educators to emphasize lower level writing skills in assessment and in teaching rather than focusing on the process of writing. There is a tendency to assess what is taught. Current written language assessment measures do not effectively measure meaningful writing behavior and skills related to the process of writing (Beminger, Mizokawa & Bragg, 1991).

Dissatisfaction with current assessment has led to a focus on direct measures of learning (Feuerstein, Rand & Hoffinan, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). Dynamic assessment, which includes an instructional component, evaluates the process of learning (Haywood et al, 1990). One approach to dynamic assessment is the graduated prompt. The graduated prompting procedure provides intervention in the form of predetermined standardized prompts that are sequenced from general to more specific (Brown & Campione, 1984). The graduated prompting approach utilizes the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) which provides an indication of what the child is capable of doing with assistance.

This method provides a measure of the amount and type of intervention needed in order for a writer to develop higher level cognitive skills necessary for effective learning. Children or learners with broad zones of proximal or potential development would likely benefit more from intervention whereas those with narrow zones will not perform much beyond their unassisted levels. Through an interaction between the child and adult, a measure of the amount of assistance needed to allow for independent strategy use can be obtained. Therefore, information on the child's readiness to learn or the benefits gained from instruction can be gathered (Jitendra & Kameenui, 1993, cited in Knodel, 1996).

English writing composition tasks are very common and of high importance in Iranian educational contexts. Most of the students' productions in final exams are writing tasks. The major goal of this study is to examine the effectiveness of Brown's graduated prompting of dynamic assessment and mediation through a mediated learning experience, in understanding what is needed to produce change in picture-cued written compositions, as initially assessed using a standardized measure. This approach will be employed with intermediate EFL learners without a learning disability to investigate its effect in their writing ability.

Dynamic assessment is recommended as a valid and useful assessment approach which could serve maximized instruction across age groups (Banks & Neisworth, 1995). When working with diverse populations, practitioners can utilize DA, which focuses on the learning process and utilizes mediational approaches that are more closely related to learning process in school and other life contexts (Haywood & Lidz, 2007). The theoretical roots of DA in Iran are widely investigated in a variety of researches such as Birjandi and Najafi Sarem (2012), Nazari (2012) and Shabani, Khatib and Ebadi (2010) but their applications in classes and educational contexts

need more elaboration. Based on the theoretical roots and their implications the researcher in this study believes that the findings of the current study on the effects of DA in writing ability of Iranian learners are important because they can be used by instructors and practitioners in the field of EFL that seek for new methods of assessing the learners abilities. In this study, the researcher will indicate the implementation of DA in picture-cued writing tasks of Iranian EFL learners. In addition to indicating the difference (if any) between DA and NDA in practice, this study will reveal the opinion of learners' towards DA and whether gender has any effect on picture-cued written tasks through graduated prompting procedure of DA.

Research questions

Considering the purpose of the present study and in order to trigger more research in the field of L2 writing in Iran, the following research questions were addressed:

Q1: Can graduated prompting procedure of DA significantly improve Iranian intermediate EFL learners' picture-cued writing tasks?

Q2: Does gender of Iranian intermediate EFL learners have any significant effect on picture-cued written tasks through graduated prompting procedure of DA?

Q3: What are the Iranian intermediate learners' attitudes towards the use of graduated prompting procedure of DA during test administration?

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted with 35 Iranian EFL learners (male and female) who were randomly selected from an available population pool of 70 EFL learners enrolled in two language institutes of Esfahan, Iran. The participants were between 15 and 30 years old. The native language of all the participants was Persian. For this study, lower-intermediate EFL learners were chosen.

Instruments

1. Oxford Quick Placement Test

In order to make sure that all participants are homogeneous and truly at the same level of language proficiency, the first part of Oxford Quick Placement Test, version 2, was administered to the participants at the outset of the research. This test contains 40 vocabulary items which should be completed in 30 minutes. Those learners who answered 24-30 items out of 40 are placed into lower-intermediate level.

2. Picture-Cued Writing Tasks

Forty learners were assessed by picture-cued writing tasks taken from the website: www.Technology.com. The test contains 20 pictures that ask the test-taker to write a brief sentence for each item. The test was divided in ten parts in which two items were administered to the participants in each session. The criteria in this task are both lexical and grammatical. The content validity of the test was checked by two experienced experts in the field. Then, the researchers piloted the test to check the reliability and item analysis and report it through Cronbach's Alpha. Brown's Criteria (2004, p. 228) was used to assess the learners' responses to the test.

3. Learners' Attitudes towards Prompting Procedure Questionnaire

At the end of the treatment, a Persian questionnaire was administered in (see appendix B). The questionnaire was first developed by Amirshuibani (2013) and was modified for the purpose of this study. The first part of the questionnaire gathers personal information including age and gender of the participants. The second part consists of 16 statements related to learners' feelings about assessment through DA. All items in the questionnaire are designed for a Likert scale response using a five-interval scale of "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree," "No Idea," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree."

Design

Based on the principle of Classroom-based L2 DA, a Dynamic assessment framework was designed not merely to get feedback for the students' products, but to promote improvement of the students' writing ability. Instead of focusing on writing assessment, the framework proposed here meant to contribute to writing instruction.

Procedure

This study was done in four intact classes. The participants were randomly chosen from among two language institutes. At the outset of the study, OPT was administered to a group of EFL learners (N=70) in order to select 35 lower-intermediate learners from students studying English at two language institutes, Esfahan, Iran. It was not possible for the researchers to assign students randomly to classes since they were already placed in classes on the basis of their institutes' placement tests or their successful completion of prior courses. So, the researchers chose 4 intact classes.

In each class, the scores of the learners who did not meet the criteria of the research were excluded from the statistics. Both groups had ten sessions of test at the beginning of their classes. The tests were a part of their class time. In the first session, they were given a test to characterize their writing. The researchers analyzed each learner's writing to compare it with his or her writings after the treatment. The writings were scored based on Brown's Criteria (2004). In each session, two pictures were presented to the learners and they were asked to write a brief sentence to describe the pictures in 30 minutes.

The experimental group received the intervention, i.e. graduated prompt. For each learner the number and the kind of prompt used was checked for later analysis. The control group was assessed in a non-dynamic way in which they answered the tests without prompts. Graduated prompt had three levels as follows:

1. General prompt (take another look): The teacher asks the learners to take another look at their writing to edit it.
2. Suggested area of focus (take a look at your writing structure)
3. Specific area of focus/directive with feedback (what do you need at the beginning of a sentence?)

At the end of the treatment, the writing scores of the two groups were obtained and compared. In both groups, the researchers specified each learner's progress during the treatment period. A second rater scored the answers based on the criteria which produced an inter-rater reliability. In addition, prompts were checked in the teacher's checklist depending on the level of prompt required. This was done to see which level was used more than the other. Finally, the participants filled out the questionnaire. Finally, the learners were given instructions indicating

that the survey was anonymous and just for the purposes of finding out how learners feel about dynamic assessment.

Data analysis and results

Gender

As it is shown in table 1 and chart 1 below, in the control group, the highest frequency belongs to 21 female learners, and the lowest frequency belongs to 14 male participants. In the experimental group, the highest frequency belongs to 20 female participants and lowest frequency belongs to 15 male participants.

Table 1. Gender distribution of participants

Group		Frequency	Percent
control	female	21	60.0
	Male	14	40.0
	Total	35	100.0
Experiment	female	20	57.1
	Male	15	42.9
	Total	35	100.0

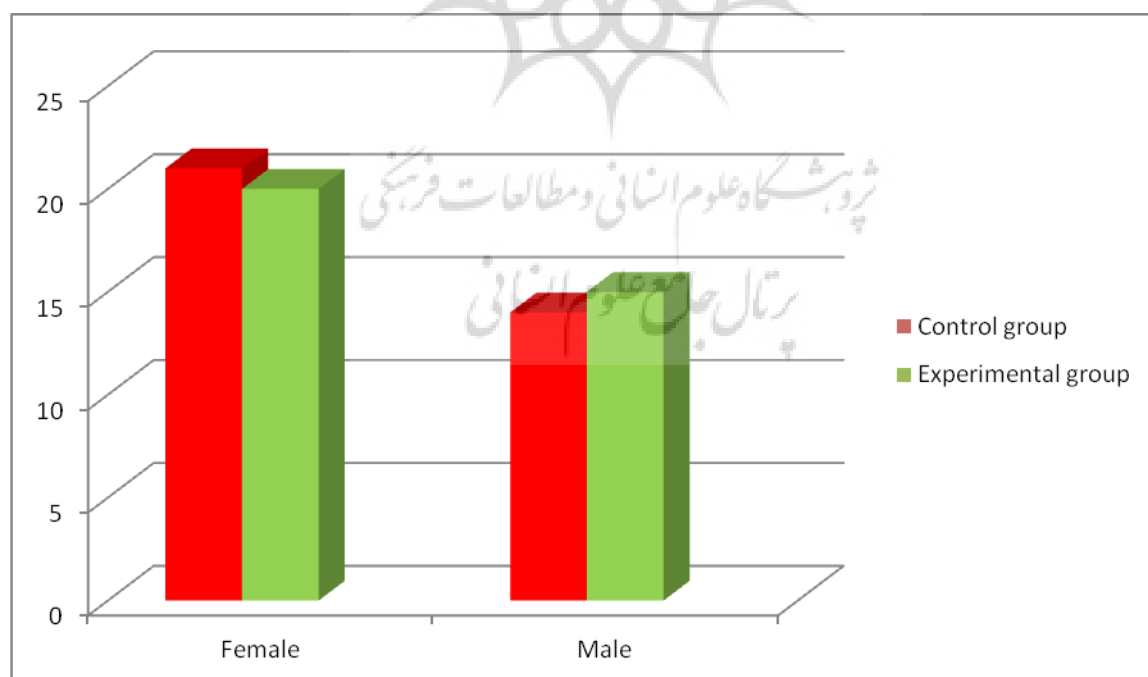


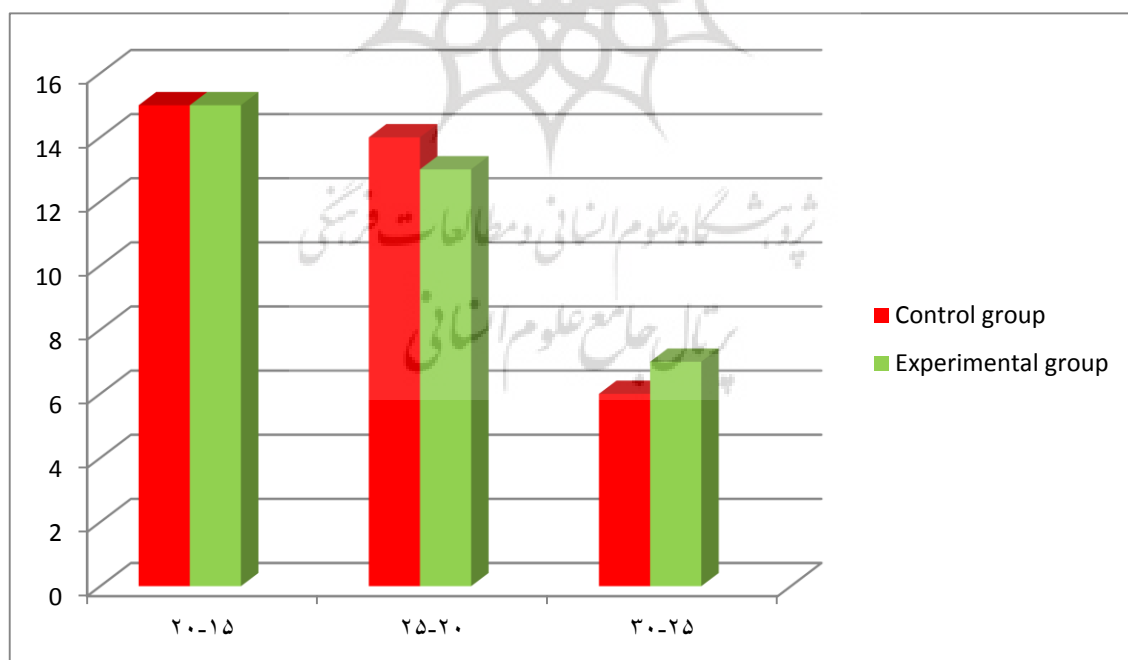
Chart 1. Gender distribution of participants

Age

In like manner, table 2 and chart 2 below show the frequency distribution of participants in terms of age:

Table 2. Age frequency distribution of participants

Group		Frequency	Percent
control	15-20	15	42.9
	20-25	14	40.0
	25-30	6	17.1
	Total	35	100.0
	15-20	15	42.9
	20-25	13	37.1
	25-30	7	20.0
	Total	35	100.0

**Chart 2.** Age frequency distribution of participants

As for the analysis of the data, the descriptive statistics of the obtained scores are presented in the following table and the related chart:

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of scores

Group		pre test	post test
control	Mean	2.9592	2.7755
	Std. Deviation	.64502	.73523
	Minimum	1.71	1.43
	Maximum	4.14	4.00
Experiment	Mean	2.9306	4.2776
	Std. Deviation	.70700	.55214
	Minimum	1.43	2.57
	Maximum	4.14	5.00
Total	Mean	2.9449	3.5265
	Std. Deviation	.67195	.99438
	Minimum	1.43	1.43
	Maximum	4.14	5.00

Based on the above table and as regards the questionnaire, the mean is 3, which shows that answers to questions in the control group and pretest of experimental group are lower than the mean and thus, not desirable. Also, based on standard deviation, answer dispersion in the experimental group and posttest is .55214 which is low compared with other answers.

In chart 3 below, the mean scores of the questionnaire between the experimental and control groups in pretest and posttest are compared. According to this chart, scores of the experimental group and control group in pretest have little differences and scores of the experimental group comparing to the control group have increased significantly.

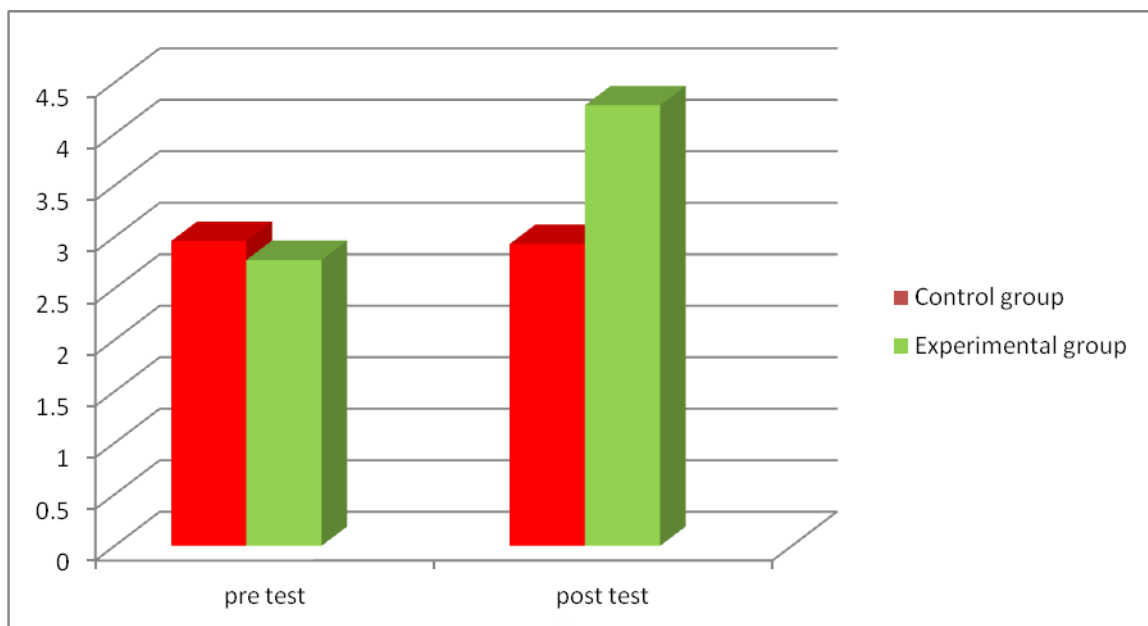


Chart 3. Mean comparison between two groups in pretest and posttest

Inter-rater reliability

Kappa value for pretest is .895, which represents that pretest scores are reliable.

Table 4. Symmetric Measures

		Value
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.895

Kappa value for pos-test is .757, which shows that posttest scores are also reliable.

Table 5. Symmetric Measures

		Value
Measure of Agreement	of Kappa	.757

In order to check the claims about data distribution of one variable, KS (kolmogor-spirnof) was used. In this test, null hypothesis is a considered claim about the kinds of data distribution (Azar-Momeni1381).

As shown in table 6 below, the results of this test reveals that all the factors involved follow normal distribution in a significant way (higher than 5%). So, to test the hypothesis, parametric statistics can be used.

- H0: Normal data distribution
- H1: Abnormal data distribution

Table 6. Kolmogorof-smirnof Test

Group		pre test	post test
control	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.794	.902
	Asymp. P-Value	.553	.389
Experiment	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.667	1.303
	Asymp. P-Value	.765	.067

Table 7 below presents the comparison of the participants' scores in the pretest and posttest using t-test:

Table 7. Comparison of scores in pretest and posttest by t-test

	Pre test		Post test		t	df	P-Value
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation			
control	2.9592	.64502	2.7755	.73523	1.281	34	.209
Experiment	2.9306	.70700	4.2776	.55214	-7.774	34	.000

According to the above table, the mean scores in pretest and posttest of the control group has no significant differences ($P > 0/05$). It means that in the pretest, the experimental group was homogeneous ($P < 0/05$). The mean scores of posttest in the experimental group have increased significantly.

The differences of pretest and posttest between the control and experimental groups are compared in the table 8 below, which shows that the variance and differentiation between the control and experimental groups have a significant difference ($P < 0/05$).

Table 8. Comparison the Mean differences in pretest and posttest of the experimental group by using Independent t-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	P-Value	Mean Difference
Difference	4.101	.047	-6.805	68	.000	-1.53061

To answer **Q.1** (i.e. Can graduated prompting procedure of DA significantly improve Iranian intermediate EFL learners' picture-cued writing tasks?), the scores of the control and experimental groups were compared by using paired sample t-test. As data in table 8 shows, the mean of the experimental group in pretest, i.e, 2/9306, reaches 4/2776 in posttest. This increase is statistically significant ($P=0<0/05$). Also, according to table 8, there is a significant difference between the control and experimental groups. Thus, it can be claimed that graduated prompting procedure of DA can improve significantly through picture-cued writing tasks in DA learners as compared with NDA learners ($P<0/05$).

In order to answer **Q2** (i.e. Does gender of Iranian intermediate EFL learners have any significant effect on picture-cued written tasks through graduated prompting procedure of DA?), the differences between the scores of pretest and posttest were compared.

Table 9. Comparison of Mean differences in pretest and posttest in experimental group between male and female

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	T	df	P-Value	Mean Difference
difference	.077	.783	-.262	33	.795	-.09286



Chart 9. Comparison of Mean score of experimental group between male and female in pretest and posttest

In table 9 above, the mean scores of experimental group for males and females participants in pretest and post test are compared. According to statistics t value ($t=0/262$) and P value ($P=0/795$); therefore, there is no significant differences regarding gender.

Based on the answers collected from the questionnaire regarding Q3 (i.e. What are the Iranian intermediate learners' attitudes towards the use of graduated prompting procedure of DA during test administration?), the means of the control and experimental groups in posttest and pretest are compared through t-test (table 10 below) with median (3). Based on chart 9, the meaningful level of test for pretest of control and experimental groups and posttest of control group is higher than 0/05 which means that the ideas of the students about questions are at the mean level, but the meaningful level for posttest of the experimental group is lower than (0/05). This means that the students' ideas about questions in this group are more than the mean level. Thus, it can be concluded that the students' attitude of the experimental group towards this method is positive and result in increasing their scores.

Table 10. The results of sample t-test

Group		Test Value = 3			
		t	df	P-Value	Mean Difference
control	pre test	-.374	34	.710	-.04082
	posttest	-1.806	34	.080	-.22449
Experiment	pretest	-.581	34	.565	-.06939
	posttest	13.689	34	.000	1.27755

Discussion

The aim of this study was to see whether graduated prompting procedure of DA has any effect on EFL learners' picture-cued writing tasks. The independent samples t-test analysis of the pretest revealed that there was no significant difference ($p<.05$) between the mean scores of the participants in the two groups. In other words, the groups were homogenous in terms of their writing performance at the beginning of the training. The researchers started to apply graduated prompting procedure of DA to the experimental group, but not to the control group. To be able to compare any improvement in the experimental group's writing performance with that in the control group, both the experimental and the control groups were given a posttest at the end of the training.

The analysis of the scores using the independent samples t-test statistical procedure showed that the mean scores of the experimental group were significantly different from those of the control group. In other words, the experimental group surpassed the control group in terms of writing performance at the end of the experiment (Table 7). This finding seems to confirm the reviewed studies revealing that graduated prompting procedure of DA facilitate L2 writing and is useful for L2 writing improvement.

The results showed that the listening strategy of graduated prompting procedure of DA did affect the experimental group's writing performance. In other words, the results of the statistical analysis indicated that students who were in the experimental groups performed significantly better ($p < .05$) than the students in the control group.

Thus, graduated prompting procedure of DA can significantly improve Iranian intermediate EFL learners picture-cued writing tasks compared with NDA learners. In order to check whether the gender of Iranian intermediate EFL learners have any significant effect on picture-cued written tasks through graduated prompting procedure of DA, the researchers used t-test to compare the mean differences in pretest and posttest in the experimental group between male and female. Statistics showed that the increase in mean scores for males and females is the same and the mean score of males has increased (0/092) compared to females (Table 9); therefore, there is no significant differences between performances of males and females regarding gender.

Finally, in order to see the Iranian intermediate learners' attitudes towards the use of graduated prompting procedure of DA during test administration, the researchers gathered answers through a related questionnaire. It was revealed that based on chart 4, the meaningful level of test for pretest of control and experimental groups and posttest of control group is higher than 0/05. It means that the ideas of students about questions are at mean level, but since the meaningful level for posttest of the experimental group is lower than (0/05), the students' ideas about questions are more than the mean level. Thus, it can be stated that the students' attitude in the experimental group towards the method used is positive and result in increasing their scores.

Concluding remarks

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of DA intervention in identifying and supporting Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. The findings of the study may be limited but indicate that a DA approach can successfully improve EFL learners' writing ability. The findings also suggest that a DA approach to writing enables the teacher to more accurately evaluate learners' writing skill and after identifying the nature of their errors provide them with necessary support and as a result, improve their writing. Although DA can be integrated into the learning process as part of classroom instruction, it can also provide important information about individual students.

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2002) urge that DA should be used to make recommendations for learners, not just to describe a learner's performance. Garb (1997) argues that students who do well on the pretest and show high learning potential during the DA program should be given more difficult materials. Students with low learning potential should be given more opportunities for learning and practice. DA can be a powerful mechanism for helping teachers determine how their instruction should be differentiated for different learners. Garb (1997) adds, "DA provides us with a model of how formative assessment can be integrated into the learning process and combined with the goals of summative assessment." Finally, this study investigated the implementation of DA in intermediate EFL classroom. The amount of mediation required decreased each day throughout the DA program as the students moved from assisted to unassisted performance. Mediation provided during the DA program benefitted all students. Most students showed significant growth from the pretest to the posttest.

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Appendices

Appendix A

جنسیت:

سن:

ردیف	لطفا نظر خود را با علامت ضربدر مشخص کنید.	کاملا موافق	موافق	نظری ندارم	مخالف	کاملا مخالف
۱	در هنگام نگارش، راهنمایی های معلم باعث میشود به جواب درست برسم.					
۲	اینکه معلم در حین نگارش برگه ام را چک میکند باعث می شود بیشتر تمرکز داشته باشم.					
۳	تعامل من و معلم هنگام نگارش اعتماد به نفس مرا در نوشتن زیاد میکند.					
۴	با راهنمایی های معلم هنگام نگارش، بیشتر متوجه نقاط ضعفم در نوشتن میشوم.					
۵	راهنمایی های معلم هنگام نوشتن، در بدست آوردن نمره بالا در نگارش مؤثر است.					
۶	راهنمایی های معلم در طول امتحان مرا به بهتر کردن نگارشم بیشتر علاقه مند میکند.					
۷	با راهنمایی های معلم در حین امتحان، دیگر به فکر تقلب نیستم.					
۸	با نظارت معلم در حین امتحان، بیشتر مراقب استفاده از علائم نگارشی هستم.					
۹	با راهنمایی های معلم هنگام نگارش، میتوانم پاراگراف کاملی بنویسم.					
۱۰	راهنمایی های معلم هنگام نگارش، به بالا رفتن سرعت نگارشم					

				کمک میکند.	
				خوشحالم چون با راهنمایی های معلم در حین امتحان از نوشتن لذت میبرم.	11
				با راهنمایی های معلم هنگام امتحان میتوانم بهبود نگارشم را ببینم.	12
				وقتی معلم راهنمایی میکند نوشتن جالبتر میشود.	13
				راهنمایی های معلم باعث میشود استرس کمتری داشته باشم.	14
				اکنون اگر وقت کافی داشته باشم، مایلم بیشتر بنویسم.	۱۵
				در کل با راهنمایی های معلم در حین امتحان نگارش موافقم.	۱۶

Appendix B

	Please choose the one that best describes your idea.	Strongly agree	agree	No idea	disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Teacher's hints lead me to come up with the right answer.					
2	That the teacher checks my paper makes me have more concentration.					
3	The interaction between the teacher and me increases my self-confidence in writing.					
4	By teacher's hints, I become more aware of my weak points in writing.					
5	Teacher's hints are effective in gaining a high score in writing.					
6	Teacher's hints during test administration make me more interested in studying.					
7	By teacher's hints, I don't think about cheating anymore.					
8	By teacher's observation, I become more aware of using punctuation.					
9	By teacher's hints, I can write a coherent paragraph.					
10	Teacher's hints help me increase					

	my writing speed.					
11	I'm glad because by teacher's hints I actually enjoy writing.					
12	By teacher's hints, I can see my writing improving.					
13	Writing is more fun when teacher gives me hints.					
14	I would like to write more, if I had enough time.					
15	Generally, I agree with teacher's hints during test administration.					

