# Improving EFL Learners' Referential and Expressive Writing through Task-based Instruction in Academic Context

Delaram Pourmadnia, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Language Teaching, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
*D_pnia@yahoo.com*
Ahmad Mohseni, Associate Professor, Department of English Language Teaching, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
*amohseny1328@gmail.com*
Hossein Rahmanpanah, Assistant Professor, Department of English Language Teaching, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
*hossein_2003@hotmail.com,*
Ali Asghar Rostami Abusaeedi, Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Iran
*rostami110@yahoo.com*

**Abstract**
L2/FL writing ability, which per se includes many different types, is considered a major skill in academic settings. However, little research has been done in this area and even less has focused on the effectiveness of task-based writing instruction on the two specific kinds; namely, referential writing and expressive writing. To this end, 60 English Translation sophomores of both genders were selected and divided into two classes after ensuring their homogeneity through the Quick Placement Test (OQPT). For the pre- and post-tests, the participants were required to take IELTS writing tests requiring referential and expressive types of writing. As for the treatment of the study, all participants were instructed based on the same content materials of advanced writing and a task-based framework. The results of the statistical analysis indicated significant improvements in the participants' writing abilities in referential and expressive written tasks. Besides, the effectiveness of task-based writing techniques was approved in terms of referential and expressive types of language functions in the academic writing of Iranian EFL learners.

***Keywords:*** Language functions, expressive writing, referential writing, task-based instruction, writing skill

## Introduction

Writing skill development is essential because of its extensive use in academic as well as other settings. According to Chappell (2011), writing helps language users to express their personality, enhance communication, promote thinking skills, and develop rational and convincing reasoning. It also offers them the opportunity to reflect on their ideas and re-evaluate them, give and take feedback, and be prepared for school and employment. As to language teaching, writing plays a unique role because developing writing skills incorporates the practice and knowledge of three other skills; namely, reading, listening, and speaking (Klimova, 2013). Brown (2001) states, writing and revising procedures necessitate specialized skills rarely acquired naturally by every person. Learners need to set an objective to be engaged in the writing process. Ahmed (2010) found that learners' writing in an EFL setting is supposed to indicate their awareness of their communicative objectives, the writing context, and the intended readers. So,

the clarification of objectives paves the way for language functions to determine the types of writing. Jakobson as cited in (Hebert 2011, p. 3) labels six functions of language: referential, expressive, directive, phatic or social, poetic, and metalinguistic functions. Considering writing instruction in general and the referential and expressive types of writing in particular, empirical research on writing skill development is not yet enough and findings seem to be contradictory (DeKeyser, 2007; Storch, 2009).

Although second language instruction should focus on all the components of written language, the differences in the types of writing require separate instruction to effectively meet EFL learners' needs. Thus, the current research has considered referential and expressive types of language functions in writing to develop academic writing among EFL learners, and has addressed the following research questions:

**RQ1.** Does TBI have any significant effect on the development of referential writing?

**RQ2.** Does TBI have any significant effect on the development of expressive writing?

**RQ3.** Is there any significant difference between the effect of TBI on referential and expressive writings?

## Literature Review

### Language Functions in Writing

Given the connections between use and usage dimensions of communicative competence (McCarthy, 1991), language users are expected to understand the mode of language use when addressing their interlocutor. Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) favor two expressions to delineate two main functions of language as transactional and interactional functions. Jacobson as cited in (Holmes, 1992) implements six functions for language to ponder over more aspects of verbal communication. The current study deals only with the referential and expressive functions in written language, of which the former corresponds to the description of a context of use, object, or mental state (Hebert, 2011). Nord (2006) describes the referential function of language as:

1) Identifying the items related to some stakeholders
2) Inquiry for describing or defining certain entities
3) Explaining the way something works
4) Comparing and contrasting things
5) Making discussions on the likelihood of doing something.

On the contrary, the latter function refers to the self-expressive nature of language use whereby individuals use language to express their feeling (Halliday & Hasan, 1991). Moreover, this aspect of language use expresses personal emotions, beliefs, attitudes through various word choices.

### Task-based Instruction

Defined as a meaning-oriented activity, tasks are generally simulations of real-life language use (Skehan, 1996). In the same vein, according to Nunan (1998), task refers to classroom work involving learners in the target language, while they mainly focus on meaning rather than on forms (p.10). When they are put into practice through what is commonly called Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), according to Ducker (2012), an analytical approach is realized based on which students are exposed to holistic chunks of functionally contextualized language in which the target task plays the pivotal role in the process of learning (Prabhu, 1987).

Theoretically, TBLT is rooted in the educational theories highlighting the interdependence between experience and learning, and it is traced in cognitivist and interactionist approaches in

SLA (Doughty and Long, 2003; Samuda and Bygate, 2008). According to these authors, TBLT is an "embryonic theory of language teaching" which accommodates different efficient teaching elements emanated from SLA theories and acts in education and psychology. Task-based dominated writing instruction, the focus of the present study, makes learners involved in active, reasonable, and realistic mutual work (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Furthermore, language learners need instruction to get familiar with the language required for different types of writing because the written production measures learners' ability in and presents their ideas through clear and well-organized writing tasks. According to Tilfarlioglu and Basaran (2007), task-based writing activities "are carried out in order to produce something, achieve something specific, or portray something within a preset framework

**Tasks in second language methodology**

Widespread attention has been paid to the functional view in language teaching following the spread of the communicative approach which made the term 'task' come into the L2 methodology in the early 1980s, and applied in L2 curriculum development since the mid-1980s. TBLT was considered as a substitute for previous methods to fill the gaps and remove the faults existing in Communicative Language Teaching (Willis, 1996). Syllabi were divided into the product- and process-oriented ones, the latter of which is more aligned with the task-based syllabus.

Various schools have attempted to define *tasks* and examine task-based instruction for different purposes (Ellis, 2003). Regarding the second language acquisition field, task-based instruction is applicable for data collection and the stimulation of samples in language learning studies. As an example, Bialystok (1983) holds that a communicative task must (a) provoke real communication, (b) offer stimulus for the L2 users to convey a message, (c) exercise control over the information needed for an investigation, and (d) meet the needs for the goals of the study. According to Ellis (2003), *task* studies take into account different aspects of tasks such as (a) the task range, (b) the task standpoint for observation, (c) task truthfulness, (d) the language needed for task performance, (e) the performance of a task from viewpoint of psychology and cognition, and (f) the task's results. Accordingly, Ellis categorized the features of tasks as:

A work plan
A meaning-oriented activity
Realistic processes of language use
Something that involves any of the four language skills
Something engaging cognitive processes, and
Something possessing a clearly defined communicative outcome

Task-based writing instruction makes learners actively engaged in seemingly practical tasks for them and also those related to their real-life experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To improve writing skills among language learners, task-based instruction proposes different types of tasks that are helpful in various aspects of writing performance. The activities designed in TBLT are carried out to produce something, achieve a conclusion, or portray something within a preset framework (Tilfarlioglu and Basaran, 2007). According to Crabbe (2007), tasks suggest a performance structure that follows a communicative purpose. They create different potential opportunities for learning by classroom activities applicable to teachers or learners. Actually, when using tasks, learners are inspired to control their learning independently and follow the task models to improve their performance.

Finally, different task types have been used with EFL learners so that they can acquire the English language through the analysis of language forms, structures, and functions, which would otherwise face them with difficulties when working on tasks, specifically referential and expressive written tasks.

## Method

### Design

The present study applied a quasi-experimental research design, using intact groups to measure the effect of TBLT on EFL learners' writing. Conducting the task instruction with two experimental groups, the study used a pre- post-test design to investigate the possible effects of the treatments. The dependent variable was EFL the participants' referential and expressive writing performance, and the independent variable was TBLT.

### Participants

The participants of this study were selected through convenience (availability) sampling, from a pool of 120 students studying English and doing an advanced writing course in the South and Central Tehran branches of Islamic Azad University (IAU) in Tehran. They comprised 60 sophomores (both males and females) who had passed an entrance exam as well as general English courses. However, an English proficiency test (OQPT) was administered to check their language proficiency for the purpose of homogenization. As a result, 60 advanced English learners randomly assigned to two experimental classes which included instruction on the two types of writing. The homogeneity of the students was ensured in the light of the mean and the SD of the test scores, meaning that among all the students, only those with scores within one standard deviation plus and minus the mean were set as the main participants.

### Materials and Instruments

To get to the pre-determined purpose of the study, two instruments, i.e. Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), and the expressive and referential writing components of the General Training IELTS were employed. Since writing performance requires special language based on the function of the written text, the participants needed instruction to get familiar with the language required for different types of writing. To do so, two types of referential and expressive written texts were chosen as the materials on which to build the instruction (treatment).

As for Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), the 2nd version of the Oxford QPT test was administered initially for about 30-45 minutes, during which time the students answered 60 multiple choice test items in two parts. This test measured their knowledge of the literal and intended meanings of written and spoken English. The test consisted of two parts: a cloze test and multiple-choice items. The first part included 40 questions. The design of the test allowed participants to answer the second part after finishing the first without problems. The second part included 20 questions, and the estimated time to answer all the questions was 30–45 minutes.

The IELTS expressive and referential writing components were used as the pretest. This writing module included two tasks of general interest topics. In Task 1, the participants were presented with a situation and asked to write a request letter or explain a situation of personal, semi-formal, or formal style in 150 words in 20 minutes. In Task 2, they were asked to write an essay of 250 words to respond to a point of view or argue a problem in 40 minutes.

The pretest followed the IELTS writing rubric and tasks were evaluated and rated by two raters (the researcher and an experienced English teacher who was highly familiar with the procedures). The raters used an analytic rubric to evaluate participants' responses on the four

common levels: (1) Task Response, (2) Coherence and Cohesion, (3) Lexical Resource, and (4) Grammatical Range and Accuracy. These levels are taken as the core features for assessing the writing performance. Also, a 0-9 scale was used to assess each feature and check if the learners had gained the command of the language in terms of appropriateness, accuracy, and fluency. The results obtained were used to estimate inter-rater reliability as well.

It should be mentioned that since all of the participants in the advanced writing course had experienced paragraph writing, the writing tasks were administered in the form of paragraph writing. The rationale behind running the pretest was to evaluate the learners' ability in describing someone or something, explaining or comparing things, and discussing probabilities or capabilities. To assess the learners' writing performance after implementing the treatment, the posttest was administered in both groups. It was similar to the IELTS pretest tasks and aimed to their achievement in referential and expressive writing.

**Procedure**

To achieve the purposes of the study, five sources of data were first compiled and reviewed separately: the results of the proficiency test, and the results of IELTS writing pretests and posttests, each made up of two writing assignments; namely, the referential and the expressive tasks. Then, the participants in the two groups were exposed to the same advanced writing coursebook, and a task-based framework taken from Willis and Wills (2007) was adopted with the following stages:

1. Priming level (including the participants' pre-knowledge simulation of the subject matter and a facilitative task
2. Main task level
3. Reporting level

As far as the priming is concerned, the topic was introduced to make the learners ready for the forthcoming task stage and engage their schematic knowledge. Then, facilitative tasks were used to help them in the future task via applying the pre-existing knowledge on how to write topic sentences, organize ideas, etc. These tasks helped them to complete the main task in a better manner. Then, regarding the jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making, and opinion exchange tasks, the participants were engaged in the next stage i.e., the main task stage according to the topic and the information they might need. For the referential type of writing, the tasks were designed to direct them toward describing the situation or a state. They were asked to list some information related to the topic and write a draft. The tasks were used for expressing ideas, thoughts, and feelings on the topics.

The report stage aimed to have the participants conclude the prior stages. It was postponed to the next session when the participants were required to deliver an essay. Afterward, the teacher provided feedback on the main components of an essay.

**Data Analysis**

For the preliminary data analysis, descriptive statistics determined normal data distribution through the computation of the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis of the participants. Thus, tests to determine the independence of covariate and treatment effects were first conducted to satisfy the assumptions of the main statistical analysis. A Pearson Correlation was also computed in order to probe any significant agreement between the two raters who rated the performance of the participants on the tests of referential and expressive writing. The Test of the Equality of Covariances determined the homogeneity of variances. While the Analysis of

Variance (ANOVA) was used to find out if a difference existed in the participants' writing scores, after implementing the tasks.

## Results

The data collected through this study were analyzed using independent-samples *t*-test and repeated measures ANOVA whose core assumption is checking data normality. Table 1 below shows the skewness and kurtosis measures and their ratios over the standard errors.

**Table 1**

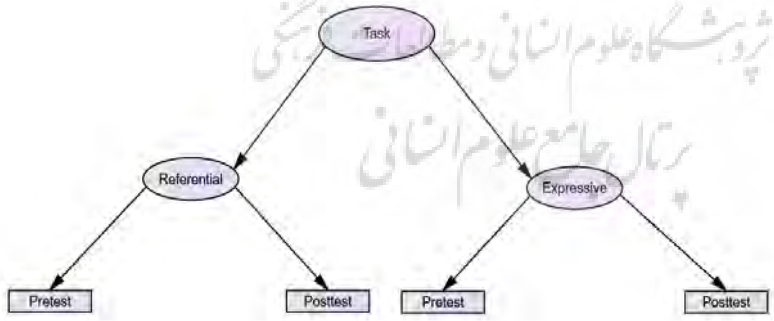
*Descriptive statistics: testing normality of data*

| | | N | Skewness | | | Kurtosis | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Group** | | **Statistic** | **Statistic** | **Std. Error** | **Ratio** | **Statistic** | **Std. Error** | **Ratio** |
| **Task** | **QOPT** | 27 | .853 | .448 | 1.90 | 1.337 | .872 | 1.53 |
| | **Pre-Referential** | 31 | .458 | .421 | 1.09 | -.788 | .821 | -0.96 |
| | **Pre-Expressive** | 32 | .397 | .414 | 0.96 | -1.233 | .809 | -1.52 |
| | **Post-Referential** | 34 | -.167 | .403 | -0.41 | -.389 | .788 | -0.49 |
| | **Post-Expressive** | 33 | -.040 | .409 | -0.10 | -1.039 | .798 | -1.30 |

Repeated measures ANOVA plus simple effect analysis were run to find answers to the posed research questions. Figure 1 below displays the design of ANOVA. This design has two within-subject effects, i.e. task and time. There are two types of tasks; referential and expressive measured at two-time intervals of pretest and posttest. Repeated measure ANOVA probes the effects of types of task and time, and their interaction. This design also includes between-subjects effect treatments which include task-based instruction. The effect of treatment type and its interaction with within-subject effects were also computed.

**Figure 1**

*Design of repeated measures ANOVA*




The homogeneity assumption was met (Box's $M$ = 18.29, $p$ = .172 > .001). That is to say, the correlations between any two dependent variables were roughly equal across groups.

**Table 2**
*Box's test of equality of covariance matrices: pretests and posttests of writing by groups*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Box's M** | 18.294* |
| **F** | 1.408 |
| **df1** | 10 |
| **df2** | 755.955 |
| **Sig.** | .172 |

*Box's M should be tested at .001 levels (Field, 2018).

The assumption of sphericity as measured through the Mauchly's test need not be reported here because when there are two tests or two within-subject effects, the probabilities of the Mauchly's test are not computed, as displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3**
Tests of between-subjects effects; overall writing by groups

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Intercept* | 25564.892 | 1 | 25564.892 | 780.987 | .000 | .961 |
| **Group** | 4.892 | 1 | 4.892 | .149 | .702 | .005 |
| **Error** | 1047.490 | 32 | 32.734 | | | |

**Table 4**
*Tests of within-subjects effects: pretests and posttests of writing by groups*

| Source | | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | *F* | *Sig.* | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Time** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 223.779 | 1 | 223.779 | 20.773 | .000 | .394 |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 223.779 | 1.000 | 223.779 | 20.773 | .000 | .394 |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 223.779 | 1.000 | 223.779 | 20.773 | .000 | .394 |
| | **Lower-bound** | 223.779 | 1.000 | 223.779 | 20.773 | .000 | .394 |
| **Time * Group** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 29.661 | 1 | 29.661 | 2.753 | .107 | .079 |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 29.661 | 1.000 | 29.661 | 2.753 | .107 | .079 |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 29.661 | 1.000 | 29.661 | 2.753 | .107 | .079 |
| | **Lower-bound** | 29.661 | 1.000 | 29.661 | 2.753 | .107 | .079 |
| **Error (Time)** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 344.721 | 32 | 10.773 | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 344.721 | 32.000 | 10.773 | | |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 344.721 | 32.000 | 10.773 | | |
| | **Lower-bound** | 344.721 | 32.000 | 10.773 | | |
| **Task** | **Sphericity Assumed** | .204 | 1 | .204 | .078 | .781.002 |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | .204 | 1.000 | .204 | .078 | .781.002 |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | .204 | 1.000 | .204 | .078 | .781.002 |
| | **Lower-bound** | .204 | 1.000 | .204 | .078 | .781.002 |
| **Task * Group** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 1.145 | 1 | 1.145 | .439 | .512.014 |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 1.145 | 1.000 | 1.145 | .439 | .512.014 |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 1.145 | 1.000 | 1.145 | .439 | .512.014 |
| | **Lower-bound** | 1.145 | 1.000 | 1.145 | .439 | .512.014 |
| **Error (Task)** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 83.413 | 32 | 2.607 | | |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 83.413 | 32.000 | 2.607 | | |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 83.413 | 32.000 | 2.607 | | |
| | **Lower-bound** | 83.413 | 32.000 | 2.607 | | |
| **Time * Task** | **Sphericity Assumed** | .028 | 1 | .028 | .013 | .910.000 |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | .028 | 1.000 | .028 | .013 | .910.000 |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | .028 | 1.000 | .028 | .013 | .910.000 |
| | **Lower-bound** | .028 | 1.000 | .028 | .013 | .910.000 |
| **Time * Task * Group** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 2.851 | 1 | 2.851 | 1.334 | .257.040 |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 2.851 | 1.000 | 2.851 | 1.334 | .257.040 |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 2.851 | 1.000 | 2.851 | 1.334 | .257.040 |
| | **Lower-bound** | 2.851 | 1.000 | 2.851 | 1.334 | .257.040 |
| **Error (Time* Task)** | **Sphericity Assumed** | 68.413 | 32 | 2.138 | | |
| | **Greenhouse-Geisser** | 68.413 | 32.000 | 2.138 | | |
| | **Huynh-Feldt** | 68.413 | 32.000 | 2.138 | | |
| | **Lower-bound** | 68.413 | 32.000 | 2.138 | | |

Based on Table 4 above, the following results were obtained:

A. There was a significant difference between the overall mean on the pretest and posttest disregarding types of tasks and groups ($F$ (1, 32) = 20.77, $p$ = .000, partial eta squared = .394 representing a large effect size).

B. There was no significant interaction between time and groups ($F$ (1, 32) = 2.75, $p$ = .107, partial eta squared = .079 representing a moderate effect size).

C. There was not any significant difference between the overall mean on expressive and referential tasks disregarding time and groups ($F$ (1, 32) = .078, $p$ = .781, partial eta squared = .002 representing a weak effect size).

D: There was no significant interaction between task and groups ($F$ (1, 32) = .439, $p$ = .512, partial eta squared = .014 representing a weak effect size).

E. There was no significant interaction between task and time ($F$ (1, 32) = .013, $p$ = .910, partial eta squared = .000 representing a weak effect size).

F. There was no significant interaction between time, task and groups ($F$ (1, 32) = 1.33, $p$ = .257, partial eta squared = .040 representing a weak effect size).

**Table 5**

*Descriptive statistics: pretests and posttests of referential and expressive writing by groups*

| Group | Time | Task | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Task | Pretest | Referential | 15.115 | .550 | 13.995 | 16.235 |
| | | Expressive | 15.731 | .662 | 14.382 | 17.080 |
| | Posttest | Referential | 17.346 | .788 | 15.741 | 18.951 |
| | | Expressive | 17.346 | .703 | 15.915 | 18.777 |

According to the results shown in Table 5 above, the task-based group had a significantly higher mean on the posttest of referential writing ($M$ = 17.34) than in the pretest ($M$ = 15.11) with Mean Difference = 2.23 and $p$ = .008. Thus, using tasks as a classroom technique positively improved learners' ability in referential writing in which learners were able to define, describe, and explain someone or something. Also, the task-based group had a significantly higher mean on the posttest of expressive writing ($M$ = 17.34) than in the pretest ($M$ = 15.73) with Mean Difference = 1.61 and $p$ = .012. Thus, considerable improvement was seen in this group in which learners experienced progress for the expression of personal feelings, thoughts, ideas, and opinions.

**Table 6**

*Pairwise comparisons: pretests and posttests of referential and expressive writing by groups*

| Group | Time | (I) Task | (J) Task | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval for Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Task | Posttest | Referential | Expressive | .000 | .376 | 1.000 | -.765 | .765 |
| | | Expressive | Referential | .000 | .376 | 1.000 | -.765 | .765 |

In addition to descriptive statistics, Pairwise Comparisons were conducted to compare each pair of posttests in both types of writings and check whether the difference between them was signiifcant. Table 6 above indicates that there was not any significant difference between the task-

based group's means on posttests of referential ($M$ = 17.34) and expressive ($M$ = 17.34) writing with Mean Difference = .000 and $p$ = 1.

## Discussion

Based on the results reported in the previous section, through using three-stage tasks, the participants' performance in writing referential and expressive texts was improved. Actually, a statistically significant difference was found between their performance in the pretests and posttests in each group, revealing that implementing tasks is one of the influential factors to enhance EFL learners' writing capacity. This finding provides support for the position taken by some scholars concerning the effectiveness of task-based techniques in instructional situations. As an example, the finding is in line with the findings declared by Sundari, Husnaini Febriyanti, and Saragih (2017). They examined the use of developed task-based materials in EFL writing classes at university level. The difference between their study and the current study lies in the fact thar here the focus was on two types of writings i.e., referential and expressive writings and therefore, the finding showed that developed task-based materials significantly affect writing performance in terms of format, content, organization, and sentence grammar. The finding of the study is also in line with those reported by Kafipour, Mahmoudi, and Khojasteh (2018) who studied the effect of TBLT on analytic writing by EFL learners. They came across significant improvements in the writing performance of the target learners' practicing TBLT-based writing skills. Moreover, their findings revealed that task-based writing techniques significantly enhance EFL learners' writing in various dimensions of writing like mechanics, language use, vocabulary, content, and organization.

## Conclusions

According to the results obtained in the current research, applying task-based instruction can boost the writing capacity of EFL learners in both referential and expressive text types. Therefore, based on the results gained from exploring the effect of task-based instruction on the improvement of EFL learners', a general conclusion can be drawn, i.e. task-based instruction affects the development of referential and expressive writing among EFL learners. This is due to the fact that TBLT creates an authentic language learning situation and writing tasks may contribute to expressing meaning and transmitting messages across realistic situations (Nunan, 2010). This finding is advantageous for teachers who want to promote their students' writing performance in general, and the two mentioned types of writing in particular. It may also be useful for teachers in improving students' level of writing, with a major focus on proficiency tests such as IETLS and TOEFL.

Finally, a suggestion for further research is to separately analyze the effects of the instruction of different text types.

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