



## Effects of Collaborative Tasks on EFL Learners' Written Production

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The importance of meaning-based teaching of the writing skill as an end in itself has mostly overlooked due to the common traditional grammar-based approaches used in writing instructions within the English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the effects of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-writing task on complexity, accuracy, and fluency in EFL learners' written products. To this end, 113 Iranian EFL learners were selected. The learners were randomly assigned to two different experimental groups, namely grammar-focused group and meaning-focused group, and one control group. After doing a writing task as the pretest, the participants in the two experimental groups received task manipulations during a fifteen-minute pre-writing phase for seven sessions. Afterwards, all the participants attended a final posttest of writing. The findings revealed significant effects of the meaning-focused pre-writing tasks on the participants' writing fluency, and the significant effects of the grammar-focused pre-writing tasks on the participants' writing accuracy. The results also showed that the experimental groups outperformed the control group in terms of complexity. However, there were no significant differences between the two experimental groups. The implications of the findings are also discussed

**Keywords:** collaborative writing, pre-writing tasks, meaning-focused instruction, grammar-focused instruction, CAF

### INTRODUCTION

The essence of developing writing skill within the field of second/foreign language learning does not anymore provoke controversy among the researchers (Merkel, 2018; Muller & Gregoric, 2017). In other words, it is a largely agreed-upon issue that writing skill plays a vital role in language learning and development (Steinlen, 2018). What is

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rather startling, however, is the multitude of studies on micro-writing level of development mainly focusing on a general improvement of word-choice, grammar, and mechanics of writing (Manchon & Matsuda, 2016). This is while, writing inherits the most enabling potentials for meaning conveyance which can empower the learners to express their personal involvements and show off their active engagement in interactive aspects of real-life communication (Ellis, 2009; Johnson, Mercado & Acevedo, 2012; Nunan, 2004).

Indeed, second/foreign language learners seek ways of improving their writing skill in order to meet their real-life needs and demands (Sadiku, 2015). Common state of affairs among Iranian foreign language learners is also indicative of a growing concern for initiating correspondence with people outside the borders and applying for occupational and educational opportunities abroad through the vessels of written communication (Gholaminezhad, Moinzadeh, Youhanaee, & Ghobadirad, 2013; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Therefore, teaching writing in order to acquire a static skill of producing merely well-formed pieces of language lags behind the seemingly global interest of second/foreign language learners (Defazio, Jones, Tennant & Hook, 2010; Steinlen, 2018). This call for a more productive and responsive way of mastering writing skill necessitates drastic overhauls of the approaches to writing instruction. In fact, new ways of teaching writing which conform to the communicative needs of learners are in question (Fernandez Dobao, 2012; Frear & Bitchener, 2015).

Acting on the call to serve as a basis for communication rather than language practice, Task-based Language Instruction (TBLI) has striven to canvass the importance of language learning at a macro-level of development (Ellis, 2009). Ellis (2003) defined a task as a work-plan which "is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world" (p.16). The common assertion of TBLI is that language learners have to take meaningful and collaborative actions while they are engaged in pre-, during- and post-task phases in order to accomplish a task and reach its pedagogical or communicative outcomes; therefore, the learners, within a TBLI program, are expected to learn how to write while they may need to negotiate meaning with other learners or the teacher, in order to achieve stated outcomes and goals (Long, 1991; Nunan, 2004). To the best knowledge of the researchers, however, studies on collaborative task performance are scarce and need further investigations; this is while collaboration seems to be an obvious function of communication and hard to be overlooked. As a result, the application of the insights of TBLI to improve the quality of writing through meaningful collaborative pre-tasks constitutes the primary focus of the present investigation.

Writing which is defined as a cognitive learner-centered process of meaning making has recently formed an important part of task-based investigations (Cho, 2018; Ong, 2014; Ong & Zhang, 2010). It is noteworthy that measures of language performance within TBLI include complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) which are borrowed from investigations of the aspects of the oral language production (Robinson, 2003). Although TBLI paves the way for meticulous evaluation of task performance in terms of CAF instead of adhering simply to measures of accuracy (accurate grammar and word-

choice), there are still controversial debates among the researchers and teachers over the beneficial effects of task complexity manipulation on CAF (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Ong & Zhang, 2013). Therefore, the present study aimed to draw a comparison between the effects of manipulating collaborative meaning-focused pre-tasks of writing and grammar-focused pre-tasks on CAF in EFL learners' written production.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Manipulation of Task Conditions

Skehan's (1996) Limited Attentional Capacity Model of task complexity shaped out of his general skepticism for the presentation-practice-production approaches to language teaching and his interest in statements of cognitive processes (McLaughlin, 1990). Skehan (1996) starts with a very succinct explanation of the targeted variables and their relationships and as such addresses three features of language production as the goals of investigation, namely complexity, accuracy and fluency or CAF. Complexity is defined as the scope of language usage; the correctness of lexical or grammatical choices is known as accuracy; and fluency is understood as the speed with which the language user produces the language (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996). The presumption is that the quality of these three aspects is affected by different factors during the task completion process which includes the limited capacity of mental and attentional resources.

More specifically, accuracy which is also defined by Robinson (2001) as the native-like command of rules of the target language is by definition closely linked to the aspects of well-formedness and correct choice of grammar and vocabulary. Complexity, on the other hand, is associated to the concept of restructuring as a cognitive process during which the layout of learner's interlanguage becomes more systematized and more complex. This complexity of the interlanguage then, entails successful communicative events in which more complicated ideas are exchanged (Swain, 1995). Finally, fluency is introduced as the capability to produce language during a communication event in a rate and speed comparable to the norms of native-language productions. Schmidt (1992) discusses that fluent production presupposes the essence of access to and use of implicit knowledge during the real-world communication. It is worth noting that fluency is also related to the restructuring process and the speed by which access to interlanguage system is possible; in other words, integrating conceptualization of ideas, mentally planning their production and access to the output for the purpose of language production at the due time and with appropriate speed is what brings satisfaction in communication (Carr & Curren, 1994).

However, Skehan (1996) pinpoints that learners' mental capacities are limited. Therefore, they cannot devote their full attention to all the three aspects of language production simultaneously. The consequence in such a case would be a need for prioritizing. This means that a cognitively demanding and complex task would lead to a prioritization of fluency over accuracy and complexity. This limitation of mental capacities is in fact the point where Robinson's predictions diverge from Skehan's. According to Robinson's (2003) Cognition Hypothesis which is buttressed by the insights from information processing hypothesis (Doughty & Long, 2003), learners are

equipped with unlimited capacities of attentional and memory resources thus, an increase in cognitive loads and demands of a task would change the direction of access to these resources (it is either directing or dispersing) and would cause different effects on the production; therefore the prioritization process as was suggested by Skehan (1996) is rejected.

This controversy of predictions sets the grounds suitable for the emergence of a new line of research within TBLI, i.e. task complexity manipulation effects. Although task complexity manipulation primarily grew out of the investigations of oral language production, soon it turned into a palpable area of enquiry into writing. The general tendency was to examine the effects of task complexity manipulation along different conditions on CAF (Abdollahzadeh & Fard Kashani, 2011; Daneshkhah & Alibabae, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Ong & Zhang, 2010). The findings, albeit constructive, add to the complexity of the disputes among the researchers with regard to the effects of manipulating task conditions.

Ong and Zhang (2010), in a comprehensive study of manipulation of pre-task planning time condition, examined 108 EFL learners' argumentative essays. The findings partially supported Robinson's (2003) hypothesis in that resource-dispersing dimensions deteriorate CAF and also partially Skehan's (1996) in that there is a trade-off effect at work when the working memory overloads with the cognitive demands of the task. Ong and Zhang argue that although availability of learners' pre-task planning lowers the task load and consequently the working-memory load, demonstrating its effects on the overall writing quality needs further investigations.

In another study conducted by Ong (2014), the effects of manipulating task conditions along planning time and learners' prior knowledge were investigated on the frequency of five metacognitive processes (generation of new ideas, elaboration of new ideas, organization of new ideas, thinking of essay structures and thinking of language aspects of the task) and CAF. One hundred six Chinese students of an English Language Program took part in this inquiry. The results showed that prior knowledge had a higher influence on metacognitive processes than the planning condition; and planning time was only significantly different with regard to the frequency of thinking of language aspects. Moreover, with regard to overall writing quality, the results indicated a prioritization of form over content. But the question is, whether this prioritization of form over content happened due to a number of limitations imposed on the access of mental and linguistic resources or because of the type of attention (form/meaning) required by the task condition. That is to say, the type of task condition may necessitate a preference of attention to form rather than the content. Though the findings were consistent with Skehan's (1996) predictions which state complex tasks overload mental capacities and lead to a trade-off effect, yet more research is required to resolve the role that the type of attentional requirements of the task may play.

#### **Focus on Form vs. Focus on Forms Instruction**

As the importance of meaningful communication and the need for developing interactive approaches to teaching a second language (L2) increasingly gained ground during the

beginning of 1990s, Long (1991) introduced a dichotomy of focus-on-form (FonF) vs. focus-on-forms (FonFs) instructions to emphasize the efficacy of the type of attentions required by a task and the mechanisms involved during the task performance. According to Long (1991), FonF upholds the value of authentic incidental communication and signifies the importance of communicative language teaching rather than explicit grammar instruction. On the other hand, FonFs instruction adheres to the principles of traditional teaching of the target structures which leads to paying intentional attention to forms. In the FonFs instruction which is operationalized through a presentation-practice-production approach the aim is to redirect the focal resources towards the forms of the language and cause a grammatical awareness-raising (Schmidt, 1990). This dichotomous instructional approach evoked a tendency among the researchers to examine and compare the efficacy of FonF and FonFs instructions. As a result, a multitude of well-situated studies on discovering the most effective approach to grammar instruction emerged (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 2000).

According to Ellis (2005), an opportunity to perform the task before the main performance is provided in rehearsal planning. In other words, using task repetition with the first performance of the task increases learners' preparation for the subsequent performance. Access to the real task materials is provided for learners through pre-task planning (Ellis & Yuan, 2004). The pre-task phase allows students to orient themselves towards the task through activities that help learners meet the demands of a task by accessing linguistic resources, relevant background knowledge, and content (Ortega, 2005). The pre-task phase allows students to orient themselves towards the task through activities that help learners meet the demands of a task by accessing linguistic resources, relevant background knowledge, and content (Ortega, 2005). In this study, two types of pre-tasks were administered. The first one was meaning-focused pre-task which prepared the learners to write by having access to the relevant background and content. The second one was grammar-focused pre-task which prepared the learners to write by requiring more practice on the target structures.

In a study, Salimi, Bonyadi and Asghari (2014) investigated the effects of form-focused instruction on L2 learners' written task performance in terms of accuracy among intermediate and advanced level students. To this end, 60 English learners were randomly chosen as the participants of the study whom were divided into two low-proficiency and high-proficiency groups. Each group was for a second time divided into experimental and control subgroups. Therefore, the low-proficient and high-proficient students of the experimental groups received form-focused instructions, but their counterparts in the control groups did not receive any type of instructions. The results of the study revealed that the high proficient students in the experimental group were significantly different from all the other groups in terms of accuracy. In fact, the type of instruction applied for the experimental groups accompanied with a higher language proficiency lead to a more accurate production. However, the results were at odds with the study conducted by Pishghadam, Khodaday and Daliry (2011) on the effects of form-focused vs. meaning focused instruction. Based on the findings of this study which included 65 EFL students, form focused instruction had more efficient effects on the students' Linguistic productions. Norris and Ortega (2000) had already explained that

FonFs is as important as FonF and that they constitute the complementary sides of the same coin. This position was later verified by Sheen (2003), who claimed that FonFs is equally effective if not more so, as it provides the learners with explicit knowledge of the rules which can assure their understanding and learning.

However, Shak and Gardner (2008) looked at the role of attentional resources from a quite different angle point. They investigated children's attitudes towards four types of FonF tasks in Brunei Darussalam. The selected task-types were consciousness-raising, dictogloss, grammar interpretation and grammarian. The participants' perceived task enjoyment, ease, performance and motivation were addressed in this study. A total of 78 upper-primary school children aged 9 to 12, from three intact classes, received FonF treatment. The results showed that while there was a general tendency for positive attitudes among children with regard to FonF tasks, variations in task preferences occurred. Three main sources of influence in particular included: cognitive demands, production demands, and pair/group-work opportunities. This study illustrated that FonF tasks can be embedded in the communicative language teaching contexts. The children who had participated in this study reported that the lessons were enjoyable, easy and effective mostly because they were engaged in pair or group works. They were able to perform well and were motivated to do more FonF tasks. The implication of the findings of this investigation was that the more the context of language teaching resembles the real life communications in which collaboration, focus on meaning conveyance and feedback exist, the more beneficial consequences can be expected. In fact, Fernandez Dobao (2012) asserted that, collaborative task performance (writing task) has significant effects on the accuracy of the language production, but that the effects of it on the other two aspects of linguistic output, i.e. complexity and fluency, is still unresolved.

Recently, Abrams and Byrd (2016) conducted a comprehensive exploratory study in which they addressed the effect of collaborative meaning-focused pre-writing tasks vs. collaborative form-focused pre-writing tasks on the full pack of CAF. Although the results did not show any significant differences with regard to the complexity and fluency of the two groups, the grammatical accuracy improved significantly as a function of the collaborative meaning-focused pre-writing tasks.

It is worth mentioning that, as far as the number of studies on the issue of collaborative meaning-focused/grammar-focused pre-tasks were drastically scarce and as the effect of collaborative meaning-focused vs. form-focused pre-writing tasks on complexity and fluency remained an unsolved issue, the researchers in the present study aimed to examine this issue. Hence, with respect to the importance of defining writing as a purposeful communicative skill which is more than a mere piece of accurate language production, it was intended to evaluate writing as a myriad of aspects including complexity, fluency and accuracy. Therefore, the following questions were sought to be answered:

1. Are there any significant differences between the effects of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on EFL learners' writing complexity?

2. Are there any significant differences between the effect of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on EFL learners' writing accuracy?

3. Are there any significant differences between the effect of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on EFL learners' writing fluency?

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

The present experimental study is quantitative in nature. The manipulation of collaborative pre-tasks was outlined as the independent variable with two categories namely collaborative meaning-focused and collaborative grammar-focused pre-tasks. The dependent variable was the quality of writing. Concerning the quality of production, this study investigated complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) in EFL learners' written production.

### **Participants**

Initially, 129 female EFL learners within the age range of 12 to 15 from six intact classes at Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Ahvaz, Iran, were recruited. These six classes of participants then were divided into two different experimental groups, namely meaning-focused and grammar-focused groups and one control group. The participants were native Persian speakers whom were homogenized in terms of level of language proficiency based on the ILI placement test which holds systematic terms and principles for measuring EFL learners' mastery of language performance. The participants in the present study were in the tenth grade generally known as the pre-intermediate level which means they have had an average experience of learning English in the ILI for two years and sixth months. By the time of data analysis, however, only 113 sheets of data were verifiable either because the participants in the pretest of writing were absent in the posttest and vice versa, or because either of the tests of a participant did not have face or content validity regarding the required topic of the writing task.

### **Instrument**

#### *Tests of Writing*

The participants were supposed to write a narrative paragraph of about 70 to 100 words within a time span of approximately 15 minutes. A narrative type was chosen mainly because, due to its monological nature, it can exclude any difficulties imposed on the participants' performance by the type of the task. Therefore, the participants in this study were asked to describe their favorite movie stars. This topic was chosen for two reasons. The first reason was that the participants had a unit about movie stars and their fans in their books, thus through activation of relevant schema during the pre-task phase they could access enough vocabulary and information to write about the topic. Secondly, the participants were teenagers and young adults and to a great deal enthusiastic followers of movie stars; therefore, it was assumed that they have something to tell about. The topic for the pretest was '*describe your favorite movie star and his/her best role*' which was slightly different from the topic of the posttest which was '*describe*

*your favorite movie star and his/her last role*'. The reason for this change was to preclude the practice effect during the post test.

#### *Pre-task Worksheets*

Seven work sheets covering the simple past and past continuous structures were prepared for grammar-focused group from the well-known English textbooks such as *Modern English* (Frank, 1986), *Graded Exercise* and *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (Azar & Hagen, 2009). There are two reasons behind choosing these books. First, grammar rules are classified in these books and these classifications facilitate the preparation of proper exercises for the purpose of pre-task assignments and second, they are among the books whose validity for teaching grammar in Iran had been largely accepted and were among the most cited books for grammar instruction.

The participants in the meaning-focused group had a short leaflet on mind-mapping duplicated from a book named *Academic Writing from Paragraph to Essay* by Zemach and Rumisek (2005). There are two issues worth regarding the type of pre-task given to the participants in the meaning-focused group. While engaged with mind mapping during the pre-task phase, the learners need not take care of the grammaticality of their productions. They have to generate relevant concepts and meanings and bring them into meaningful organizations according to their inner criteria not based on a linear predetermined structural format. It resembles a kind of problem solving task which helps negotiate meaning collaboratively and write meaningfully. In addition, mind maps are easy to follow during the writing phase and due to their non-linear organization, they own sufficient flexibility for further elaborations (Bukhari, 2016).

#### **Treatment and Data Collection**

As far as the study was an attempt to compare the effects of meaning-focused pre-tasks and grammar-focused pre-tasks, the six classes of the participants were assigned into three different groups consisting of two experimental groups and one control group. Therefore, each group had to receive their own special treatment. At the first session, all the participants took the pretest of writing. The allocated time was 15 minutes for the task to be done. During the second session, all the participants were taught a preliminary introduction of basics of paragraph writing which included a review of topic sentence and controlling idea, support sentences and restatement of the topic sentence or the conclusion. The next seven sessions were devoted to the treatment of the study during which the participants in the grammar-focused group did the worksheets of grammar by practicing some specific grammar points (simple past and past progressive) in some drills such as fill-in-the-blanks and writing the correct verb forms using the worksheets given to each pair; the participants of the meaning-focused group spent time on drawing their mind maps collaboratively. The students in both groups were divided randomly into pairs in order to do their pre-tasks collaboratively. The pre-task completion required 15 to 20 minutes to be done. There was no predetermined structure or definition for the type of students' collaborations. They had to rely on each other's knowledge and experience to refresh and activate their background knowledge for the purpose of task accomplishment. In each session the participants were provided with



some brief explanations about how to finish the worksheets or do the mind maps; moreover, they were insistently reminded not to change their partners during the whole treatment sessions. The reason was to control the effects of individual differences. The participants in the control group, however, did not receive any type of intervention but the basics of paragraph writing. They were taught according to the assigned syllabus of the ILI between the time of pretest and posttest. Finally, at session ten, all the participants were given the posttest of writing. At the end, 16 invalid writing samples from the three groups were excluded and as such the writing samples of 40 learners in meaning-focused group, 38 in grammar-focused group, and 35 in control group were selected for the purpose of data analysis.

### **Coding and Data Analysis**

The writing quality was assessed at three levels of syntactic complexity, grammatical accuracy and fluency (CAF). The complexity was measured using the mean length of T-units (Skehan & Foster, 2012), the accuracy was examined according to the number of error-free clauses to the total number of T-units (Ellis & Yuan, 2004), and the fluency as the last component of CAF was taken as the total number of words produced per minute by each participant (Ong & Zhang, 2010). The measures of complexity, accuracy, and fluency were borrowed from the previously validated studies on CAF (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ghavamian et al., 2013; Ellis & Yuan, 2004). Each writing sample was scored by two raters in order to ensure the inter-rater reliability of the scores. The inter-rater reliability was measured as 0.95, 0.93, and 0.98 for writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency, respectively. The collected data were fed into SPSS for further statistical analyses. The quality of the complexity, accuracy and fluency of the written texts were measured by applying the one-way ANCOVA test to see the differences between the groups. Moreover, post-hoc tests were used to determine the differences between the groups.

### **FINDINGS**

The first research question of the present study underwent an investigation of whether there are any significant differences between the effect of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on pre-intermediate EFL learners' writing complexity. To answer the first research question, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted. First, the assumptions necessary for computing ANCOVA including linearity, homogeneity of regression of slopes, and reliability of covariate were met. Afterwards, the scores on the pretest and posttest of writing complexity for meaning-focused, grammar-focused, and control groups were analyzed through one-way ANCOVA. The independent variable was Group (i.e., meaning-focused, grammar-focused, and control), the dependent variable was the participants' scores on the writing complexity posttest, and the covariate was the participants pretest scores. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Scores on Writing Complexity at the Posttest

Groups	Mean	SD
Meaning-focused	15.029	4.245
Grammar-focused	14.076	3.876
Control	9.440	1.909
Total	12.978	4.262

As Table 1 depicts, the mean scores of the participants in the meaning-focused ( $M = 15.029$ ,  $SD = 4.245$ ) and grammar-focused ( $M = 14.076$ ,  $SD = 3.876$ ) groups were higher than those of the control group ( $M = 9.440$ ,  $SD = 1.909$ ). Then a one-way ANCOVA was carried out to examine if there was a significant difference between the posttest scores of the three groups while the pretest scores were held constant which was indicative of a significant difference between the two experimental groups on the writing complexity of the posttest score,  $F(2, 109) = 34.968$ ,  $p = .000$ , partial eta squared = .391. The results showed a significant difference between the participants' performance on the pre and posttests. To locate where the differences lie, Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc tests were performed (Table 2).

Table 2  
Fisher's LSD Post Hoc Tests

(I) Input Group	(J) Input Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Meaning-focused	Grammar-focused	.296	.683	.666
	Control	5.215*	.693	.000
Grammar-focused	Meaning-focused	-.296	.683	.666
	Control	4.919*	.700	.000
Control	Meaning-focused	-5.215*	.693	.000
	Grammar-focused	-4.919*	.700	.000

Table 3 displays that the mean scores of both meaning-focused ( $MD = 5.215$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and grammar-focused ( $MD = 4.919$ ,  $p = .000$ ) groups were significantly different from those of the control group. This means that both experimental groups outperformed the control group. Moreover, the results showed no significant difference between the meaning-focused and the grammar-focused groups ( $MD = -0.296$ ,  $p = .666$ ). The second research question probed into any probable significant differences between the effect of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on pre-intermediate EFL learners' writing accuracy. To find out the results, the scores on the pretest and posttest of writing accuracy for meaning-focused, grammar-focused, and control groups were fed to SPSS and analyzed through one-way ANCOVA. Independent variable was Group (i.e., meaning-focused, grammar-focused, and control), dependent variable was the participants' scores on the writing accuracy posttest, and the covariate was the participants pretest scores. Table 3 depicts the descriptive statistics.

Table 3  
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Scores on Writing Accuracy at the Posttest

Input Group	Mean	SD
Meaning-focused	1.771	.227
Grammar-focused	2.027	.461
Control	.410	.189
Total	1.436	.766

According to Table 3, the meaning-focused ( $M = 1.771$ ,  $SD = .227$ ) and grammar-focused ( $M = 2.027$ ,  $SD = .461$ ) groups proved higher mean scores compared to those of the control group ( $M = .410$ ,  $SD = .189$ ). A one-way ANCOVA was then applied to outline any probable significant differences between the posttest scores of the three groups while the pretest scores were held constant. The results showed a significant difference between the two experimental groups on the writing accuracy posttest scores,  $F(2, 109) = 302.969$ ,  $p = .000$ , partial eta squared = .848. The findings are illustrative of a significant difference between the participants' performance on the pre and posttests. In order to show where the differences lie, Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc tests were performed (Table 4.4).

Table 4  
Fisher's LSD Post Hoc Tests

(I) Input Group	(J) Input Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Meaning-focused	Grammar-focused	-.261*	.068	.000
	Control	1.360*	.070	.000
Grammar-focused	Meaning-focused	.261*	.068	.000
	Control	1.620*	.070	.000
Control	Meaning-focused	-1.360*	.070	.000
	Grammar-focused	-1.620*	.070	.000

Table 4 displays that the mean scores of both meaning-focused ( $MD = 1.360$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and grammar-focused ( $MD = 1.620$ ,  $p = .000$ ) groups were significantly different from those of the control group. This indicates that both experimental groups outperformed than the control group. Moreover, the results illustrated that the grammar-focused group significantly outperformed the meaning-focused group ( $MD = .261$ ,  $p = .000$ ). The third research question was an investigation of any significant differences between the effect of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on pre-intermediate EFL learners' writing fluency. To answer the third research question, initially, the assumptions necessary for computing ANCOVA including linearity, homogeneity of regression of slopes, and reliability of covariate were checked. Afterwards, the scores on the pretest and posttest of writing fluency for meaning-focused, grammar-focused, and control groups were analyzed through one-way ANCOVA. Independent variable was Group (i.e., meaning-focused, grammar-focused, and control), dependent variable was the participants' scores on the writing fluency posttest, and the covariate was the participants pretest scores. Table 5 below shows the descriptive statistics.

Table 5  
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Scores on Writing Fluency at the Posttest

Input Group	Mean	SD
Meaning-focused	8.095	1.751
Grammar-focused	7.254	2.144
Control	6.748	2.473
Total	7.395	2.181

As Table 5 illustrates, the mean scores of the participants in the meaning-focused ( $M = 8.095$ ,  $SD = 1.751$ ) and grammar-focused ( $M = 7.254$ ,  $SD = 2.144$ ) groups were higher than those of the control group ( $M = 6.748$ ,  $SD = 2.473$ ). A one-way ANCOVA was carried out to examine if there was a significant difference between the posttest scores of the three groups while the pretest scores were held constant. The statistics proved that there is a significant difference between the two experimental groups on the writing complexity posttest scores,  $F(2, 109) = 27.864$ ,  $p = .000$ , partial eta squared = .338. The results showed a significant difference between the participants' performance on the pre and posttests. In order to locate where the differences lie, Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) post hoc tests were performed (Table 6).

Table 6  
Fisher's LSD Post Hoc Tests

(I) Input Group	(J) Input Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Meaning-focused	Grammar-focused	1.256*	.307	.000
	Control	2.404*	.323	.000
Grammar-focused	Meaning-focused	-1.256*	.307	.000
	Control	1.147*	.320	.001
Control	Meaning-focused	-2.404*	.323	.000
	Grammar-focused	-1.147*	.320	.001

Table 6 shows that the mean scores of both meaning-focused ( $MD = 2.404$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and grammar-focused ( $MD = 1.147$ ,  $p = .001$ ) groups were significantly different from those of the control group. This means that both experimental groups outperformed than the control group. Moreover, the results showed that the meaning-focused group significantly outperformed than the grammar-focused group ( $MD = 1.256$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question of the present study addressed the effects of pre-task manipulation on the complexity of the writing task. Based on the results, the experimental groups were significantly different from the control group, but there were no significantly observable differences between the grammar-focused and meaning-focused groups regarding the complexity of the writing. But this finding does still contain an explanatory power in favor of the effects of task manipulation. Put it clearly, a meaningful cognitive balance between the manipulation of task conditions and the learners' state of interlanguage influences the patterns of cognitive restructuring and leads to generation of more complex ideas and structures and consequently more complex productions (Swain, 1995). As such, manipulation of the pre-writing tasks

provides the opportunity for the learners to approach the writing task in a ready state of mind. In case of the present study, it seems that the learners in the experimental groups had a more sophisticated interlanguage at their disposal by the time of writing task completion mainly because the required linguistic and background knowledge of these participants was appropriately activated during the seven sessions of the intervention. Though the results did not correspond to the findings of Ong and Zhang (2010) and Ong (2014) who specifically measured the effects of pre-task planning, yet there is a strong tendency by the results towards accepting the effectiveness of the manipulation of pre-task conditions on the complexity of the writing. As such, the speculations of Skehan's (1996) Limited Attentional Capacity model is rejected in favor of Robinson's (2003) predications. That is to say, cognitive demands of a task specify the path in which the attentional resources should be directed. As such, it is predicted that the learners voluntarily navigate their attention towards one or two more required aspects of production, here the complexity.

With regard to the second research question, the attempts were made to measure the effects of collaborative meaning-focused and grammar-focused pre-tasks on the accuracy of the writing. It is wise to remind that, in the current research, writing was defined as a collaborative and purposeful means of meaning conveyance (Cho, 2018). Therefore, grammatical accuracy was investigated as only one of the factors influencing the written linguistic communication. Based on the findings, the grammar-focused group which proved to be significantly different from the control group outperformed than the meaning-focused group in terms of accuracy. The influence that the collaborative grammar-focused pre-task manipulation exerts on the quality of the accuracy of the production is twofold. Discussing it from the vantage point of the efficacy of the explicit grammar instruction, one can take position with Sheen (2003) and Norris and Ortega (2000) in that FonFs instruction and explicit attention to form seem to guarantee learning of the grammatical points; thus, the accuracy of the writings improves as was the case in the abovementioned studies. The results were also in line with Pishghadam et al.'s (2011) study which was indicative of the advantage of form focused instruction over the meaning focused one.

Under the light of Abrams and Byrd's (2016) and Fernandez Dobao's (2012) studies and also the findings of the present study, it is viable to confirm the effect of collaborative interaction on the accuracy of the writing. Put it another way, it can be claimed that collaboration and in-pair task performance can enhance the accuracy of writing among the EFL learners. This might be due to the possibility that is provided for the learners during the pair work to rely more on each other and to share the knowledge which helps them lower the cognitive burden and spent more quality time on the task performance. Such a proposition was enlightened before by Robinson (2003) who insistently states that if the task cognitive complexity and demands increase, the result would be a deliberate navigation of the attentional resources towards one or two aspects of the language performance. In fact, linguistically driven manipulations pave the way for an increase in accuracy and complexity, while more functionally driven tasks lead to an enhancement of the fluency (Robinson, 2003).

From what was discussed up to this point, one can well infer why fluency which was one of the aspects under investigation increased among the meaning-focused group and why this group outperformed than the grammar-focused one. As a matter of fact, the participants in the meaning-focused group devoted most of their time on the collaborative generation of concepts and preparing their mind maps through which they wanted to illustrate their path of thought, i.e. the meaning they wanted to convey not the form in which they had to put their ideas. Accordingly, irrespective of the structural concerns, the participants in the meaning-focused group showed a higher rate of writing production (a higher fluency). Such a result can be justified according to Schmidt (1992) who explains that real world communication paves the way for accessing the implicit knowledge which is a prerequisite of fluent and effortless language production. Collaboration and focus on meaning in particular and task-based approach to teaching in general set the grounds suitable for learners to experience a real-life situation of language use and finally enhance the fluency of writing.

To sum up, the present study asserts that if a higher writing quality is desired, the teachers and researchers have to lend credence to the teaching of writing at a macro-level and as a meaningful and communicative task. However, a mere understanding of the primary position of writing without providing the appropriate context for its teaching and learning is still flawed. As a matter of fact, the results of the present study imply that there are more factors involved in successful teaching of writing within an EFL context than accuracy of the written text. By the way, it is not meant that accuracy should be overlooked, but that overemphasis on accuracy and micro-level grammar-based teaching may mask the other covert but essentially influential factors involved in the matter such as the type of pre-task manipulations and the type of interaction (individual, pair or group work) required by the task. Applying appropriate manipulations to the task condition and adding the taste of collaboration and interaction not only enhance the quality of learning, but also bring rapport and motivation among the learners (Shak & Gardner, 2008). Finally, it is recommended to the teachers and learners to reconsider the role that collaborative meaningful pre-writing task can play in improving the writing ability. Moreover, it is hoped this study embraces the attention of other researchers interested in the topic to pursue this important issue and conduct further research.

This small-scale study was conducted with its own limitations, as limitations are inevitable. Firstly, because of the small sample size any assertion of generalizability has to be treated with caution. Secondly, the researcher was not able to collect all the data alone because of the limitations of time and the ILI educational policy, so it was inevitable to ask some of the researcher's colleagues to help in collecting data; therefore, the participants may not have been treated equally. Finally, the participants in this study were selected from a particular group of EFL learners at pre-intermediate level of proficiency, so the findings may not be applicable to other groups of ESL/EFL learners.

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