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Entitled

**The Effects of Reading to Write Tasks and Writing Only Tasks on Writing
Performance of Iranian EFL Learners**

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In the Name of God

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This study investigates the effects of reading-to-write tasks and writing only tasks on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, 52 second year students at the University of Tabriz were assigned to one group. These participants were asked to write on two writing- only and two reading-to-write tasks followed by a 20-item questionnaire on their attitude toward the reading to write tasks. Their writings were scored. In order to analyze the data, matched T-tests and correlation analysis were employed. The questionnaire's items were also analyzed. The results of the study showed that the difference between the reading-to-write tasks and writing- only tasks was significant with reading-to-write tasks yielding higher scores. In addition, correlation analysis suggested that writing-only tasks and reading-to-write tasks are significantly related to each other. Furthermore, the results indicated that the difference between different reading-to-write tasks was not significant. Both descriptive and argumentative reading-to-write tasks had a similar effect on test takers' writing performance. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed the test takers' preference for the reading-to-write tasks. The main finding was that EFL students benefitted from the use of reading-to-write tasks in their writing assignments. The results of this study may have implications for Iranian foreign language writing improvement.</p>	

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Those who teach composition and conduct educational research about writing assessment consider writing assessment as a problematic area (Huot, 1990). Researchers in this field are always struggling to develop methods to produce valid and reliable means of assessing writing quality of students. Writing assessment is a very complex field given the complicated nature of the writing construct (Gebriel, 2006).

Research on the writing construct has emphasized the difficulties of disentangling the inextricably meshed variables involved in the writing process such as writing topic, writing tasks, writing modes, writing scale and rater behavior (Cumming et al., 2000; Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Reid & Kroll (1995) categorize these variables as contextual variables, content variables, linguistic variables, task variables, rhetorical variables and evaluation variables.

According to Hoetker (1982, cited in Hout 1990) lack of research with topic development and task selection in direct writing assessment can affect the quality of writing. Hout (1990) states that the subject of topic development and task selection has come a long way since the mid 1970s. Another important issue is whether the type of writing called for in a prompt could have an effect on the quality of writing (Hout, 1990). Do different kinds of writing will receive different types of scores? There are two other issues concerning the task selection and topic development. Rhetorical specification and wording and structure of writing prompts are two important factors which affect the students' writing quality. In planning appropriate writing tasks, these factors should be considered by task planners within particular writing contexts and upon specific test populations (Hout, 1990).

“What one does when one writes depends on what one is given to begin with” (p.453). Horowitz (1986) states that the nature of a writing task is determined by what the writer is given, so tasks in which different things are given to writers are essentially different. Answering the question of what kinds of academic writing tasks are typical, Horowitz (1986) provides a generalized American academic writing task:

Given a topic, topicless thesis statement, or full thesis statement, an indication of the audience’s expectations, specified sources of data (readings, lectures, tables, pictures) and a lexis constrained (to some extent) by all of the above, find data which are relevant to each question and then reorganize and encode those data in such a way that the reader’s expectations of relevance, coherence and etiquette are fulfilled.
(p.455)

Regarding these different and important variables in writing assessment process, this study wants to investigate one of these variables which is writing task. We want to examine whether different types of writing tasks (writing-only tasks and reading-to-write tasks) will affect the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

1.1 Statement of the problem

In spite of existence of large body of literature on theoretical relationship between reading and writing and some progresses in changing writing tasks toward new reading to write tasks, yet there is very little research which has been conducted to investigate the validity of reading to write tasks (Gebriel, 2006). However, some studies have focused on different test methods in writing assessments (Esmaeili, 2002; 2000; Gebriel, 2006).

Considering this emerging trend in writing tests, the differences in performance among different test methods should be investigated. So the current study attempts to investigate how foreign language learners perform on writing only and reading to write tasks. More specifically, the study wants to explore the relationship between performance of foreign language learners in both writing only and reading to write tasks.

1.2 Purpose of the study

This study investigates the effect of two writing test methods. The two writing test methods considered in this study are ‘writing only’ and ‘reading to write’ tasks. First, more specifically, the effect of writing only and reading to write tasks on writing performance of learners will be investigated. Second, the relationship between the scores of these two test types will be examined. Third, the effect of different reading to write tasks with different modes on writings of students will be investigated.

1.3 Significance of the study

This study investigates an important issue in the area of second and foreign language assessment; and it is the difference between the effect of reading to write and writing only tasks

on writing performance. So, this study could be helpful in providing information about the effects of these new reading to write tasks and using them in writing assessment programs at universities. Second, the results could help identify the relationship between the scores obtained from both reading to write and writing only tasks. This correlation could provide information about whether the two task types measure a different or a similar construct. In addition, the results of this study could provide support as to whether a composite score that combines scores from both the reading to write and writing only tasks should be used or not. A composite score would be very helpful for making decision about writing ability of students at universities. Third, this is the first study of its kind addressing these issues with a sample of Iranian university students. Given the newness of reading to write tasks to the Iranian context and the impact of the cultural background on task performance, there is a need for answering many related issues. This study could provide suggestions for university writing instructors in Iran. For example, by considering some issues such as the effect of these tasks on writing performance of Iranian students and features which improves in their writings and usefulness of passages in writing of students, writing instructors can integrate these new tasks at university classes in Iran.

1.4 Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

RQ1 What is the effect of ‘reading to write’ tasks and ‘writing only’ tasks on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners?

RQ2 What is the correlation between the scores in ‘writing only’ and ‘reading to write’ tasks?

RQ3 What is the effect of different writing modes on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners in ‘reading to write’ tasks?

1.5 Research hypotheses

H0: The use of ‘reading to write’ tasks as compared to ‘writing only’ tasks will not improve the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

H1: The use of ‘reading to write’ tasks as compared to ‘writing only’ tasks will significantly improve the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

H0: There will be no correlation between scores in ‘writing only’ and ‘reading to write’ tasks.

H1: There will be strong correlation between scores in ‘writing only’ and ‘reading to write’ tasks.

H0: The use of different writing modes in ‘reading to write’ tasks will not have different effect on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

H1: The use of different writing modes in ‘reading to write’ tasks will have different effect on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners.

1.6 Definitions

Two terms have been used throughout this study. Because of their importance, these terms will be defined to assure clarity for the reader.

Reading to write tasks: These tasks are often called integrated or read to write tasks and have become popular in language testing over the past 15 years. They require test takers to write an essay after reading a text. The writing task can vary from a summary to a persuasive essay. The reading text in the task may also vary from several pages from a textbook to a list of quotations on a topic (Gebril, 2006; Plakans, 2007).

Writing only tasks: This term is used interchangeably with impromptu essay. It refers to a task that requires test takers to write an essay in response to a short prompt. Writers must use their own ideas and experiences to develop the writing. The prompts may vary from a narrative one to an argumentative one (Gebril, 2006; Plakans, 2007).

1.7 Summary

This chapter presented the statement of the problem, purpose of the study and significance of the study. Research questions and research hypotheses regarding the use of writing only tasks and reading to write tasks were presented. Key terms of the study were defined. In the next chapter, the variables of the study including writing only tasks and reading to write tasks will be discussed and previous relevant studies will be reviewed.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

2.0 Introduction

This chapter includes a review of relevant literature related to variables targeted in this study. It starts with existing models in writing assessment. Then writing only tasks, connections between reading and writing will be discussed and reading to write task as an alternative to writing only tasks will be explained and finally a number of related literatures comparing and investigating these two types of tasks will be presented.

2.1 Existing models in writing assessment

There are a variety of approaches that can be used to structure writing assessment procedures and each of them yields a different framework for assessing writing. Here we describe four available methods and their advantages and disadvantages. Assessment methods have an impact on the examinees' test performances (Cho, 2003; Bachman, 2002).

2.1.1 Traditional impromptu

Yancey (1999 cited in Hamp-Lyons 2002) “identifies three waves of writing assessment: the first wave (1950-1970), when writing assessment was done through objective testing; the second wave (1970-1986) when holistic scoring of timed essays was the preferred practice; and third wave (1986-1999) with its interest in portfolio assessment.”

Direct assessment of writing was a reaction against indirect, ‘objective’, testing. Indirect measures of writing included multiple choice items or filling in blanks testing the ability to identify and/or correct errors in syntax, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics (Greenberg, 1986). Hout (1990) locates the mid 1960s as the beginning of a time of change in writing assessment. Hamp-Lyons (2002) maintains that a renewed interest in direct writing assessment started in the

1970s given the increasing emphasis on language as communication, followed with the inclusion of direct writing tasks in some large scale language tests, such as the IELTS and TOEFL tests. Since the introduction of direct writing assessment in language tests, the writing assessment field has been intensively using the timed essay independent task as the primary method to assess the writing skills of university students (Gebril, 2006). Hamp-Lyons and Kroll (1996, p. 18) call this kind of writing assessment a “snapshot approach”:

According to Hamp-Lyon and Kroll, the single sample text, which are written under controlled and limited time constraints, about a topic that test taker has not prepared him or herself to write about can be called a snapshot approach to writing assessment. This method cuts writers off from much that is part of their writerly skills, including their background knowledge and experience. (p.53)

According to Gebril (2006), this kind of task has been criticized by many researchers (Cho, 2003; Weigle, 2004; Cumming, Kantor, Powers & Taylor, 2000; Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1996; Raimes, 1990) because “it falls short of effectively capturing the writing construct that any academic writing task is supposed to measure”. Gebril (2006) maintains that one of the problems encountered in writing only tasks is topic familiarity. If students are given a topic without sufficient background knowledge, this variable would affect students’ performance on the writing test. Cherry and Witte (1998) state, “all direct assessments of writing make certain assumptions about relationships among the underlying construct, the performance that is judged in order to make inferences about the construct and the prompts that are used to elicit performance”. In the writing assessment literature, writing prompts are assumed to elicit adequate and appropriate textual performances for making inferences about writing ability (Cherry & Witte, 1998).