

## Effect of Post-task Activity on EFL writing performance

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### Abstract

This study attempts to investigate if the revision of learner's written texts made by the teacher improves the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of his/her writing. One hundred and fifty freshmen from a university in Taiwan participated in this study. A total of six written texts were accomplished in a semester. Such written text was collected and revised by the instructor. At the end of the semester, one of the six prompts was selected as the posttest. The second writing was graded and compared with the first one in the light of accuracy, fluency and complexity. The result showed that students in Group A and B committed fewer errors and used the most appropriate vocabulary, natural expressions and more complex sentence structures in the posttest. However, Group C performed the worst. Very few students in Group C used the given vocabulary or expressions in the second writing. Obviously, teacher's revision failed to substantially facilitate the writing of Group C. To investigate participants' perceptions of the post-task requirement, a survey was conducted. The result suggests that although instruction is a good way to provide input, the amendment of written passage if used appropriately can be sources of alternative input to promote writing outcome.

### Keywords

Post-task activity; writing performance

### Introduction

The primary aim of language instruction is to promote the fluency, accuracy and complexity of learner's production. According to Ellis (2003), while listening learners can make a pretence whereas they cannot do so in the same way in production. By creating an effective learning environment in the classroom, it is hoped that students can increase the range and complexity of the target language to express the same concepts after instruction. Drawing on the gradual release of

responsibility approach (Fisher and Frey, 2008), during the teacher-student and student-student interaction phase, it is suggested that learners concentrate on getting their messages across. They are encouraged to deploy whatever language they have already learnt from earlier lessons, and experiment with language they are not sure of in order to get their meaning across. This approach suggests "focus on language" before the teacher isolates specific forms for study. At the end of the task cycle, form-focused instruction will be employed to help learners improve more rapidly and continue improving (Harley, 1998).

However, the post-task requirement is often neglected. According to Ellis (2003) the post-task phase serves three major pedagogic goals: to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task, to encourage reflection on how the task was performed, and to encourage attention to form. In other words, post-task requirement, either softly or mandatorily, may probably influence learner's learning outcome in the long run. Lynch & Maclean (2001) propose that task repetition, if it is carefully designed and managed, can help to free up attention for focus on form, thus leading to greater accuracy and complexity in performance. They state that when learners repeat a task their production improves in a number of ways. If they are not told to repeat the task, they will ignore the importance of learned material. During the task cycle, they tend to focus on getting the meaning across at the expense of accuracy. Post-task activity will compensate for that deficiency, because it is usually teacher led focusing on specific forms that occur in the texts from the task cycle or from earlier lessons that they have already been familiar with and have processed for meaning. This kind of focus on form follows the task or task cycle; it is generally pre-planned, and forms part of the language syllabus. Schmidt (1994, p. 179) states that "target language forms will not be acquired unless they are noticed and that one important way that instruction

works is by increasing the salience of target language forms in input so that they are more likely to be noticed by learners.” Obviously, the aim of the post-task activity is to encourage learners to read the text for a second or third time. In this way, they might process the language of the text slightly differently each time, thereby assuring more chances to notice different linguistic features and maybe to incorporate some of them in their subsequent writing.

Skehan and Foster (1997) investigated the effect of the post-task requirement and concluded that the post-task condition did not result in greater accuracy on the narrative tasks. On the contrary, a study done by Johnston (2005) revealed that after a planning and report stage, learners’ syntactical accuracy improved, their lexical selection was more native-like and also more varied than at the task stage. Storch (2002) has found in his study that two learners planning together will correct each other’s contributions, discuss grammar points and collocation, thus scaffolding each other’s learning.

To date, little is known about the effect of post-task activity on learning outcome. In this study, the researcher first collected learners’ written drafts, read and revised them, and finally returned the revised versions. It is hoped that the revised versions might help learners improve their writing. While reading the written drafts, the researcher focused not only on error corrections, but also on giving constructive suggestions and appropriate expressions. Its purpose is to help learners systematize what they know, and to expand their conscious knowledge of words and patterns (Willis & Willis, 2007). However, learners often go on making the same errors even after being corrected many times. The temporary mastery seems to happen when they are paying conscious attention to form, but not when they are trying to communicate and paying attention to meaning. Instead of aiming at the unachievable goal of perfection and falling short, it might be more realistic and useful to spend less time on practicing isolated patterns but more on helping learners to increase their vocabulary and deploy the language they have.

A study done by Cheng (2008) revealed that students in Taiwan preferred error correction done by the teacher and thought that a good teacher should do so. Therefore, plenty of time has been spent reading and correcting the errors students committed in their written texts. To further substantiate what Lynch & Maclean (2001) and Schmidt (1994) have proposed, this study attempts to explore if post-task requirement will improve learner’s writing performance. The following research questions will be addressed:

(1) Does the revision of learner’s written texts

made by the teacher improve learner’s accuracy, fluency, and complexity in their subsequent writing?

(2) Does this kind of time-consuming revision really help improve student’s language competence if no requirement is imposed?

(3) What do participants think of the post-task activity?

## 1 Method

### 1.1 Participants

One hundred and fifty freshmen from a university in Taiwan, divided into three groups of homogeneous English proficiency (Group A, B and C), participated in this study. Each group was divided into 10 subgroups.

### 1.2 Procedures

It is believed that “A picture is worth a thousand words”. In this study, participants were required to look at a series of three pictures and describe them based on the prompts, first in spoken form and then in written form. Because the majority of students were lack of lexis, during the priming stage five key words or expressions needed for the task were given. At the end of a two-hour period, each student was required to complete a 100-word written text based on the provided pictures. A total of six written texts were accomplished in a semester. Every written text was collected and revised by the instructor. In the revised version, errors would be corrected. Suggestions or comments on how to improve the writing in the light of coherence, structure, or word usage were given. Collocations that need attention and one or two recurring errors that have better alternative wordings or useful and natural forms that they failed to use were provided, too.

While the revised version was returned to the participants at the beginning of the next lecture, the researcher noted down some of the conspicuous errors that students had made, together with actual examples, and then wrote on the board and invited students to correct it. The corrected version was written up, and occasional recasting of student utterances and a brief explanation provided. Furthermore, participants were allowed to ask for clarification from the instructor concerning the revised parts or the suggestions or comments. After that, participants in Group A were required to first discuss with the group members, choose two natural expressions and report to the classmates publicly, and then copy down the revised version or reconstructed it. Group B was asked to read and

discuss with their group members, and then copy down the revised version or rewrite it. Group C were required to do none of the above.

At the end of the semester, one of the six prompts was selected for the participants to describe again. The second writing was graded and compared with the first one in the light of accuracy, fluency and complexity. What's more, an attempt was made to examine if the teacher's suggestions were taken into consideration while participants described the pictures the second time.

## 2 Results and Discussion

The results showed that the number of revised sentences used in the posttest significantly increased in Group A and B, while Group C gained the least. Group A and B used the most natural expressions and revised expressions in the posttest whereas the majority of Group C still used the inappropriate or wrong expressions as in the pretest even though they had been corrected. This finding substantiates that the effects of error correction depends greatly on the post-task requirement. In other words, such kind of time-consuming revision might fail to improve learner's language competence if no requirement was imposed.

Learning is a gradual, organic process and, given the right conditions, will happen even without a teacher. It is believed that learners cannot learn completely new items or rules from their own production. They can only learn them from input. To gain necessary input to complete the task, the provided picture will elicit interaction between students and teacher or students and students. Under such circumstances, students would focus on getting the meaning across while they tried to describe the content of the pictures. The teacher serving as a consultant would walk around the classroom and answer the questions students elicited. Although the picture constraints what linguistic forms students need to use or may predispose them to use particular forms, they are free to ask questions and decide how to describe or how to conduct the interaction. The pictures might be artificial but the kind of language it elicits may correspond to that found in normal communication. To carry out this task, students need to employ cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information. Students choose the linguistic or non-linguistic L2 resources to achieve the outcome of the spoken task. Even though the teacher provides key vocabulary and important expressions, the final choice of what resources to use is left up to the learner. This reflects those occur in the real-world communication. That is, in the course of learning they learn to conduct interaction focusing on oral

language use and end up in producing a clear outcome – a written passage. They employed a combination of both receptive and productive skills. They have to use appropriate words, expressions and tense to describe the pictures. Since the sequence of the events is fixed, they can practice using connectors or transitions to connect the pictures. Participants in Group A and B used more appropriate connectors or discourse markers to enhance coherence and fluency in the posttest. Nevertheless, only four students in Group C used one or two connectors in the posttest.

To sum up, Groups A and B outperformed Group C in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity of their writing. It is possible that their better performance result from peer communicative stress and repetition of the same task. Participants in Group A and B were under much more pressure after receiving the revised version. They had to discuss with their peers, report to their group or the whole class, and rewrite the texts. As Candlin & Murphy (1987) suggest, such kind of peer communicative stress might lead to better performance. During the discussion, group members might correct each other's contributions, discuss grammar points and collocation, thus scaffolding each other's learning. Through peer discussion and rewriting, participants in group A and B improved accuracy and complexity. Getting them to repeat the same task but with different partners results in a richer use of vocabulary and a higher degree of accuracy and grammatical complexity, because they are exposed to a wider variety of language. Furthermore, they might pick up new structures from each other. This finding further substantiates what Givon (1979) mentioned in his study—public performance is likely to encourage the use of a more formal style and thus may push learners to use the grammatical resources associated with this style.

Encouraging learners to reflect on their performance contributes to the development of the meta-cognitive strategies of planning, monitoring, and evaluation which are seen as important for language learning. It helps teachers to decide whether to use similar tasks in the future or look for a different type. When asked what they thought of such kind of post-task activity, 92% of the participants said that they were slightly dissatisfied with their initial task performance and generally welcomed a chance to do it again later and to achieve better results. All the participants in Group A and B agreed that such post-task activity did help them memorize the revised version, because they were forced to understand and memorize the revised version before discussing with their peers. If the revised version did not make sense to them,

they would ask their peers for clarification before copying it down. For example, the original version of student A in Group B is as follows.

Rick has many works every day that he is in the fram. He must to take some milk of the cow, and take some eggs of the hen, and feed pigs. He is very busy, but he likes his works, he is very happy.

The teacher revised his original version and suggested that he look at the pictures again to figure out more expressions to expand the passage. Then in the posttest he wrote:

Rick has much work to do in the farm. First, he must milk the cows. Second, he picks the eggs from the chickens. Finally, he feeds the pigs. He is very busy every day, but he likes his work, and feels very happy and enjoys his daily life.

He said that he read the other students writing and found “enjoys his daily life” would be a good sentence to add to his own passage. That’s the way he used to expand the passage. He tried not only to expand the passage but also to use the connectors. This further substantiated that peer discussion after revision did help learning.

All the participants in Group C stated that they couldn’t remember clearly and precisely how the sentences were revised in their first writing because they just browsed it and then put it away. They did not improve their writing at all, no matter how hard the teacher tried to correct their writing. They stuck with their original usage without taking teacher’s suggestions or revisions into consideration, because they were not required to rewrite the passage or discuss with their peers. This finding suggested that certain kind of requirement from the teacher did contribute to learning outcome.

### 3 Conclusion

The result of this study showed that participants in Group A and B committed fewer errors and used more appropriate vocabulary and complex sentence structures, and what’s more, more revised sentences in their second writing. That is, the accuracy, fluency and complexity increased in their writing. However, only three participants in Group C used the revised expressions in the second writing; most of them utilized almost the same expressions or vocabulary as appeared in their first writing and the number of errors did not diminish proportionally in their second writing. In other words, teacher’s revision failed to substantially facilitate the writing of Group C because no post-task requirement is imposed. In short, Group C performed the worst in terms of linguistic accuracy, fluency and complexity. The result suggests that although instruction is a good way to provide input, the amendment of written passage if used appropriately can be sources

of alternative input to promote EFL writing outcome.

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