Text Editing and Reconstructing in EFL Writings of Narrative and Exposition: A Study in Form-focused Approach

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Abstract
The current literature on second language pedagogy promotes a return to some form-focused instruction where collaborative tasks are encouraged. This study reports on the impact of form-focused instruction and peer revision (text-editing collaborative task) on subjects' final performance in second language writing in two rhetorical modes of narration and exposition produced by 60 junior and senior students of English divided equally into the controlled and experimental groups. The results confirmed that form-focused instruction has a better impact on simple than complex grammatical elements. The study also confirmed the significant effect of the form-focused instruction on the inter-lingual errors, and it revealed some positive effects of collaborative task especially on more proficient learners. The findings also disclosed that different processes are involved in editing as well as reconstructing expository and narrative genres. The fact that writing narrative texts was more demanding than the exposition for the learners implies the complexity of this genre in terms of cognitive processing and linguistic presentation, hence a more involvement of writing teachers on this genre is recommended.

Keywords: Writing; Form-focused instruction; Text-editing; Collaborative task; Exposition; Narrative

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Introduction

Second language learners begin the task of learning a second language from nil and, through the steady accumulation of the mastered entities of the target language, eventually amass them in quantities sufficient to constitute a particular level of proficiency. The problem, however, is that a learner will probably never produce a text like a native speaker of the same age would do. This occurs in spite of years of meaningful, comprehensible input provided to learners. Swain and Lapkin (1995) attribute this to the processes involved in producing and comprehending language. They concede that one function of the output would be to force the learner to move from semantic to syntactic processing needed for production. As such, form should be an integral part of second language teaching, especially in teaching productive skills.

Recent studies point out to the inclusion of some degree of focus on form as particularly helpful in promoting accuracy in second language acquisition. Form-focused instruction refers to the attention to formal aspects of language. It seeks a way to integrate the teaching of forms with meaning as an effective process of second language learning. Bear in mind that 'focus on form' does mean going back to the traditional grammar teaching in which linguistic features are isolated from context or communicative activities.

Most of the classroom activities in foreign language writing are based on product-oriented and little is done on the process-oriented activities. In order to promote such activities, alertness and responsiveness to formal aspects of language becomes paramount. Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1985) believe that formal grammar has a role to play in language pedagogy and they stress the importance of grammatical conscious-raising (C-R), which is the deliberate attempt to draw a learner's attention and awareness to the formal properties of the target language. In developing this awareness practically, the use of group and pair work is common practice in both first and second language classes. A number of studies (Swain and Lapkin, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Mayo, 2002) state that there are both pedagogic and social gains for most learners working in small groups. It is seen as providing learners with more opportunities to practice the L2 than are afforded in teacher led classroom activities, and as Storch (1998) emphasizes, this type of instruction needs to be studied more precisely.

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Given the encouraging results of previous research, the aim of the present study is to shed further light on the effects of form-focused instruction on second language learning. It sets out to investigate the progress of tertiary EFL learners in a form-focused writing task (text-editing) which requires subjects to work on the formal aspects of writing through collaborative reflection on the texts containing some deliberately-made errors in the formal aspects of writing. It also considers the role that proficiency plays in collaborative tasks. In reference form-focused collaborative instruction this study hypothesizes that:

Hypothesis 1: Involving learners in form-focused instruction will increase their awareness of the formal aspects of writing and will result in the use of more complex sentences.
Hypothesis 2: Being of different proficiency level in dyads in collaborative task will result in different achievements in pair groups.
Hypothesis 3: Providing learners with different genre types will increase their expressive ability in their written product.

Review of Literature

From linguistic and cognitive perspectives, Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1985) believe that formal grammar has a role to play in language pedagogy and they stress the importance of grammatical conscious-raising (C-R). What they mean by C-R is the deliberate attempt to draw a learner's attention and awareness to the formal properties of the target language. It is, of course, argued that attention to input is necessary for input to become intake that must be available for further mental processing.

Despite significant development in ESL and EFL writing, research in academic writing skill has rarely been devoted to strategy development in this skill. Although writing at the tertiary level needs to be professional, and certain technical aspects have to be taught, most EFL teachers mainly focus on presenting some prefabricated models and paradigms of various forms of writing. They scarcely follow a strategic or an interactional task-based approach that involves learners in a task type to enhance their ability in output production, whose function in second language learning is of paramount importance.

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Output production and noticing

Related to the role attributed to output production is Swain and Lapkin's output hypothesis (1995). Mayo (2002, p. 158) quotes this hypothesis which proposes three potential roles of output (both in the form of oral or written language) in second language learning:

i) noticing: producing output is an opportunity for language learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and notice that they do not know how to convey the meaning they need;
ii) hypothesis formulation and testing: the learners may use output as a way to try out hypotheses about the structure of the second language;
iii) metalinguistic function: learners may reflect on their own target language use, and their output serves a metalinguistic function enabling them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge.

Based on Swain's output hypothesis, noticing is another theoretical justification for output production. For a definition of noticing I refer to Schmidt (1990, p. 32) who describes it as "a conscious attention to input". Schmidt (1990) distinguishes between perceived information, or input, and information which is noticed by the learner, or intake. It has been claimed that intake is a prerequisite for acquisition, and noticing, which is critical to subsequent processing of form, is the necessary and sufficient requirement for the conversion of input into intake (Schmidt, 1990), and Williams (2001) confirms the enhancement of noticing through output task.

Noticing through formal instruction has thus been suggested (Fotos, 1993) to perform an interfacing function between the development of explicit knowledge of a feature, which is referred to as declarative or learned knowledge, and the eventual acquisition of that feature, or implicit knowledge, which is referred to as the knowledge that enables someone to use the second language appropriately in spontaneous situations of language use.

Form-focused instruction

Following the concept of conscious-raising as a pedagogical device, language teachers and researchers present a view of form-focused instruction in language acquisition which claims that it is through formal instruction that learners become aware of particular features of the target language and form explicit representation of what they are taught (Fotos, 1993; Storch, 2001). In reviewing the relevant research on the role of form-focused instruction in SLA, some are immediately

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faced with the problem of defining it. Ellis, Basturkemen, and Loewen (2002, p. 419) define focus-on-form as "the treatment of linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task".

Studies of the effectiveness of form-focused instruction in general and of focus on form in particular have proliferated in recent years. A major issue in second language acquisition (SLA) is what role these form-focused instruction (FFI) can play when teaching a language. In their review of 49 studies published between 1980 and 1998, Norris and Ortega (2000) found that form-focused instruction in general results in large proficiency gains, and that its effects are durable. More specifically, their study showed that explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction, and that both focus on forms and focus on form type were highly effective.

Form-focused tasks

An example of task which integrates focus on form with meaning focused communication is grammar conscious-raising task (Fotos, 1993, p. 388). Although learners focus on the form of grammar structure, they are also engaged in meaning focused use of the target language as they solve the grammar problem. According to Nassaji (1999, p. 392), through this type of task learners in pairs or in small groups are asked to discover, analyze, and learn about a particular linguistic problem through meaningful communication with one another. He concludes that such task can provide a good vehicle for promoting metalinguistic knowledge about the form-meaning relationship, grammatical structures, and pattern generalization, all of which must be developed for language success.

Different kinds of form-focused tasks which involve learners in writing production are introduced by different researchers. Mayo (2002) introduces two form-focused writing tasks as dictogloss and reconstruction although his preference was the latter. Further, Storch (2001) has compared the effect of three form-focused writing tasks, short composition, reconstruction, and editing, on the grammatical accuracy of the learners. These researchers report on the effectiveness of these form-focused writing tasks on focusing the learners' attention on *grammar*.

In a study by Storch (1998) on the text reconstruction form-focused task, it was confirmed that this task succeeded in pushing learners to produce accurate texts

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and to reflect on their language choices. Storch (2001), further, compared the amount of focus on grammatical accuracy in three task types, namely short composition, editing and text reconstruction. These tasks were completed collaboratively. She concedes the effectiveness of these tasks on drawing the learners' attention to grammar although she indicates that the editing and text reconstruction tasks, being more overtly grammar-focused writing tasks, were more successful in doing so.

From the perspective of grammar as a resource in shaping accurate and effective communication, it seems clear then that focus on form should be an integral part of the instructional design for second language writing classrooms. This does not mean, however, that students will automatically be able to transfer input received through explicit grammar instruction into productive output. Such transfer from input to output, or uptake, requires that teachers decide how to incorporate form into writing instruction.

Collaborative task

In recent years, learners are guided to assume responsibility for their learning. In line with this development, a common teaching strategy is to assign them to work on a task in pairs or small groups. To this aim, the terms cooperative and collaborative learning are variously used for specific applications to L2 learning instruction. Collaborative learning is defined by Oxford (1997, p. 443) as "a kind of process that helps students become members of the knowledge communities to have reflexive dialogues and acquire a deep knowledge".

Collaborative task and form-focused instruction

There appears to be empirical support for both collaborative learning and some degree of focus on form to enhance 'noticing'. In light of the results obtained in her classroom-based study, Foster (1998) suggests the implementation of tasks that require students to negotiate the form of their output. It is through talk in collaborative tasks that learners notice their linguistic problems, and through dialogues in those tasks learners can engage in making meaning clearer by debating language form. Foster (1998, p. 18) concluded that for the issue of attention to form, the learners who were clearly focusing on language forms produced the most modified output. However, some other researchers indicate a tentative 'yes' for the effect of different factors, namely proficiency, on collaborative learning.

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Method

This study is intended to evaluate the merits of a particular type of form-focused instruction in second language writing, and to investigate how a form-focused collaborative task type, namely text-editing, affects the writing ability of tertiary EFL students.

Participants

Thirty senior and thirty junior EFL students studying English in the department of English at Shahid Chamran University, with the average age of 23, were participants of this study. The subjects were divided into a control and an experimental group. All subjects had already passed the same courses in writing, namely 'Basic Writing' and 'Advanced Writing', but their scores on writing and reading on the university courses demonstrated that their writing proficiency ranged from low-intermediate to intermediate. Although both junior and senior subjects needed further work on their writing and grammatical accuracy, the senior subjects were treated as the control group and the junior ones as the experimental group. After participating in a pre-test, the experimental group subjects were divided into fifteen pairs on the basis of their average grades in their reading and writing courses, and went under form-focused instruction.

Tasks

The task types used in this study were text-editing and text-reconstruction. In the former task, subjects were given a passage containing incorrect forms, and the peers had to recognize and reform the incorrect forms and simultaneously concentrate on the meaning of the text. In the latter task, however, subjects were given a text containing content words and were required to reconstruct the text by inserting the necessary function words in order to produce a grammatically accurate and meaningful text. The experimental group participated in both tasks instruction for nine sessions. Text-reconstruction task was used for both groups' final evaluation because not only does it consider meaning and form, but it implies most of the complexities of writing (organizing, formatting, generating ideas, etc). Furthermore, in contrast to the text-editing task in which subjects would recognize formal errors, in the text-reconstruction task, they were required to produce the forms that they had practiced in their instruction period (see Appendix for the two sample texts).

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Results

This section presents the results of investigating the effect of form-focused collaborative text-editing task on the students' awareness of the formal aspects of writing (e.g. complexity, organization, etc.). It also indicates the extent to which this instruction period helped learners improve their accuracy when producing new texts.

Text-editing task and subjects' attention to formal aspects of writing: Grammatical accuracy

Using a quantitative approach to the data analysis, we found that form-focused instruction had advantageous effect on helping the progress of learning formal aspects of writing. First, it was the grammatical accuracy which improved significantly by the use of text-editing task, as the result is summarized in Table 1 below for the quantitative analysis of the subjects' performance in the experimental group in their pre and post-tests text-editing task.

Table 1

Experimental group's mean scores in pre & post-tests

Subjects	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig*
Pre-test	30	10.87	1.9567	.3572	
Post-test	30	14.15	2.5225	.4605	0.00

*The mean is significant at 0.05 level ($p<0.05$)

Second, the difference in the final performance of the two groups is obvious. This difference is in the detection and amendment of the deliberately-made errors in the texts of the text-editing task. Subjects in the experimental group outperformed the control group in editing the final texts. The intra-class analysis based on the independent sample t-test in SPSS statistical program is shown in Table 2 below.

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Table 2
Mean Comparison of the experimental and control groups' Texts Editing

Subjects	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig*
experimental	30	14.06	2.49822	.4561	0.00
Control	30	9.788	3.6103	.6591	

*The mean is significant at 0.05 level ($p<0.05$)

Third, the products of the text-reconstruction task were analyzed for accuracy. To measure the accuracy, all the correct decisions of the subjects in the experimental and control groups' text-reconstruction post-test were calculated and tabulated, as shown below in Table 3.

Table 3
Experimental & control groups' mean scores in text-reconstruction

Subjects	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig*
experimental	30	13.29	2.51369	.4589	0.00
Control	30	7.92	3.72218	.6795	

*The mean is significant at 0.05 level ($p<0.05$)

Although the figures in the table confirm the significant effect of the instruction period on subjects in the experimental group, they do not distinguish between types or severity of the errors. Types of errors, therefore, were further analyzed qualitatively to yield the sequence order of the subjects' improvement in their grammatical accuracy (see Figure 1).

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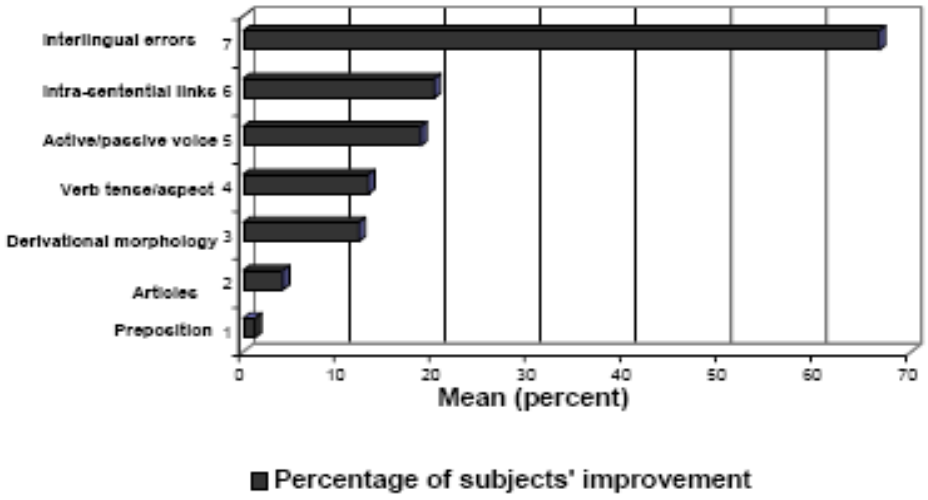
Figure 1
Subjects' improvement in the grammatical features of concern



In the text-reconstruction task, the best response required an understanding of appropriate meaning as well as appropriate grammar. In this task, the subjects had to generate ideas based on the content words given to them, and then organize those ideas and produce meaningful texts. A comparison of the subjects' products (reconstructed-texts) in the experimental and control group reveal that the former group produced texts with more complex sentences and greater grammatical accuracy (see Table 4 below), hence fulfilled the task more competently.

Table 4
Comparing subjects' performance in text-reconstruction test

	Experimental Group	**Control Group**
Complexity Average clauses/T-units	2.17	1.5
Accuracy Average Number of errors Error-free clauses/total Number of clauses	26 64	38 31

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To conclude from the data analysis, our first hypothesis stressing that collaborative text-editing task would result in the use of more complex sentences is confirmed. Although the findings in general support the use of collaborative writing task, what becomes clear from the data is that not all learners improved equally during the instruction period. High proficient subjects improved more significantly than the less proficient ones. Overall, this finding suggests that the second hypothesis, stated above, concerning the positive effect of the more proficient students on the less proficient ones is approved.

Genre types and subjects' expressive ability

As far as the genre types used in this study are concerned, the expository genre consisted of factual reports, explanation of processes, analyses of purposes, causes or results, evaluation of arguments, and conclusions, and the last of these comprised any minimal linguistic act which involved event-sequence which merges individuality, identity, and ideology into a cooperative and apparently unified version of the truths of existence (Shokouhi & Kamyab, 2004, p. 199).

An analysis of the edited and reconstructed texts in the post-tests shows that experimental group outperformed the control group in editing and reconstructing of both genres, which validates our third hypothesis that instruction of a particular genre can result in a better performance of that genre. Figures 2 and 3 below provide a comparison of this performance.

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Figure 2
Subjects' performance in editing expository and narrative genres

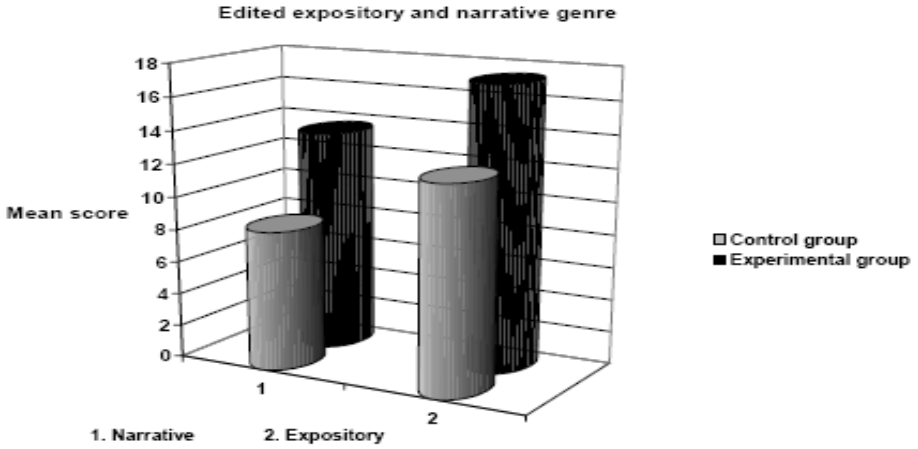
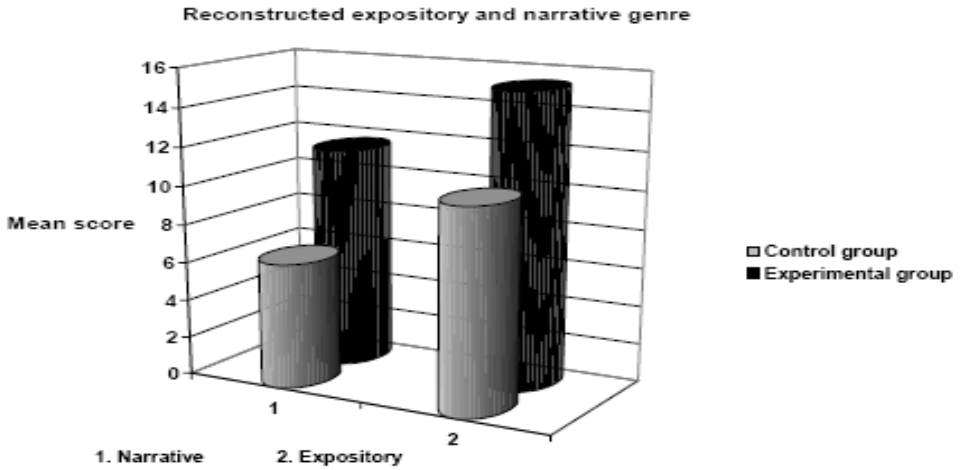


Figure 3
Subjects' performance in reconstructing expository and narrative genres



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Discussion

The findings in this study suggest that perhaps not all grammatical items and structures benefit from the same kind of classroom treatment. For example, the developmental stages of prepositions and articles are somewhat fixed for the lack of available rules. However, focus on form activities are particularly useful for developing learner awareness of those grammatical features with clear rules, and according to Fotos (1998, p. 306) "such instruction can speed up the learner' progress". This type of instruction is especially helpful for inter-lingual errors.

Besides the clarity of rules, there exist a trade off between complexity and accuracy. The more complex the sentences, the more likely they are to contain errors (Foster & Skehan, 1996, p. 308). In the present study the reconstructed texts in the post-test had to be analyzed for complexity. One measure of complexity is the proportion of clauses to T-units (C/T), which as defined by Storch (2005), are the constituents as a main clause together with other subordinate clauses which are attached to or embedded within that clause. During the performance on this task, the subjects collaborated over the structure of the written texts and provided corrective feedback to each other. Collaboration could provide an opportunity for the learners to not only receive comprehensible input but generate comprehensible output.

The data also revealed that subjects in the experimental group could accomplish both tasks of editing and reconstructing thoroughly and more competently in the given time than subjects in the control group. However, the fact that the two tasks were found to be more complex in the narrative genre than the expository genre should not be overlooked. One explanation for this different performance may be the event-sequence feature of the narrative genre. In editing and reconstructing the narrative genre, subjects had to continue the sequence of events, edit and reconstruct the texts based on that sequence. Therefore, they focused predominantly on content when working on the narrative mode and equally on the grammar and content in the expository mode. The difficulty in processing narrative could be related to the processing capacity of the working memory in the information processing system, too. The event-sequence feature of narrative makes learners store the previous events and at the same time process the succeeding ones. This in turn leaves less space available in the working memory and loads much burden on episodic memory, which has the task of keeping a record of the ongoing discourse. According to McDonald (2006, p. 383) this space is even less

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for second language learners. She further indicates that "L2 learners tend to have lower working memory spans in their L2 than their L1, and this correlates with their L2 performance". In processing the expository mode, nevertheless, the main process is storing the topic sentence and the supporting sentences which aid the topic sentence processing. This difference in processing expository and narrative genres can establish a practical framework for the writing teachers when students need specific kinds of improvement in content or grammar.

As far as the type of error and the sequence order of the subjects' improvement of grammatical accuracy are concerned, it may be argued that the difference in the order is interpreted on the basis of the instruction time needed to convey those grammatical forms from explicit to implicit knowledge and the amount of the subjects' improvement. Some grammatical forms were detected and corrected readily which led to considerable improvement of the grammatical features, as seen in Figure 1 above. This was not true overall, however. Some items required longer instruction period and corrective feedback. For instance, we found that verb-tense aspect was more readily liable to improvement, when corrected, than the articles, and the use of articles improved faster compared to prepositions. The reason is obvious: prepositions enjoy tremendous variation in use which makes it hard for the language learners to cope with so easily. Tense- aspect, on the other hand, is less complex than the articles because the articles in English are so much different from those in Persian, hence causing a challenge in the learner's overall improvement.

The sequence in difficulty can be interpreted according to the teachability hypothesis (Pienemann, 1984) which indicates that certain developmental stages are fixed, whereas others may be influenced by instruction. Focus on form, as revealed by our data analysis, is particularly beneficial to the improvement of those grammatical features which can be explained by clear rules.

Conclusion

This study claims that the benefit of form-focused collaborative tasks is that when learners work together to recognize and correct the deliberately-made errors in the text editing task, the verbalization of the problems they encounter and the availability of peers' and teacher's feedback may act to enhance their attention to formal aspects of writing. Negative peer feedback (e.g. repairs) may make learners become aware of gaps in their knowledge they may not have otherwise noted. This

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negative feedback is particularly helpful for eliminating interlingual errors. Positive peer feedback, on the other hand, may deepen or consolidate learners' knowledge about certain form-function relationships. The findings also indicate that focus on form tasks such as text-reconstruction and text-editing are suitable for enhancing writing ability, and more practice in such tasks serves as an enhancer of attention to formal aspects of writing. The qualitative analyses of the errors made clear that form-focused instruction may not be so much applicable to some linguistic features such as definite and indefinite articles and prepositions which involve complex grammar rules depending on their position within the sentence matrix.

With respect to collaborative tasks, the study has manifested that learners of intermediate to upper-intermediate second language proficiency, working in pairs, can reach correct decisions in a high proportion of instances. However, less proficient learners had less motivation in participating in task completion; as a result, in implementing such tasks, teachers' grouping of high proficient learners and their feedback in enhancing learners' achievement are considerable factors.

As for the genre type and its effect on learners' writing ability, the results revealed that although the experimental group outperformed the control group in editing and reconstructing of both genres, further analysis of the edited and reconstructed expository and narrative genres has shown that these two tasks are more complex for the learners in narrative than expository genre. Two explanations were provided for this different performance: 1) the event-sequence pattern of the narrative genre and 2) complex cognitive processes involved in processing narrative. This difference in processing expository and narrative genres can establish a practical framework for the writing teachers when learners need specific kinds of improvement in content or grammar.

Received 2 April, 2009
Accepted 12 July, 2009

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Appendix

Following are samples of two types of form focused task. In this study, text editing task was used in the instruction period, and text reconstruction was used for evaluating subjects' improvement.

Text-editing

Subjects were given a passage containing incorrect forms. Errors include choice of verb, tense/aspect, articles, morphosyntactic forms, choice between adjectival, adverbial and nominal endings and missing or wrong linking devices. Peers had to recognize and reform the incorrect forms and simultaneously concentrate on the meaning of the text.

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Original text
Recent poll about the subject fear has asked people to respond to a list of eight common phobias. Most of them include speed, heights, lifts, crowds, flying, confined spaces, open spaces, and dark. Exclude things like snakes and spiders. Poll reveals that many more women than men admit that they have experienced fear. Before you jump to the conclusion that men are braver than women, you should be warned that one explanation for the numbers in poll may be that men may be less incline than women to confess their fears.

Incorrect text
Recent poll *in* subject fear *had asked* people respond to list of eight common phobia. Most of it include speed heights lifts crowds flying confined spaces open spaces and dark. Exclude thing like snakes and spiders. Poll reveal that many women than men admits that they experience fear. Before you jump conclusion that men are more brave than woman, you should warn that one explanation in the numbers in poll be that men may be less incline to women confess their fears.

Text-reconstruction
Subjects were given a text containing content words and were required to reconstruct the text by inserting the necessary function words (articles, prepositions), linking words and inflectional morphemes (marking of plural noun forms), and mechanics (punctuation) in order to produce a grammatically accurate and meaningful text. The first sentence is intact to help students recognize the topic sentence.

Original text
The fact that women are generally more perceptive than men has given rise to what is commonly known as women's intuition. This quality is particularly evident in women who have brought up young children, for a mother who has a young child relies largely on nonverbal channels for communication. Thus, many women develop an ability to pick up and decipher nonverbal signals, as well as an accurate eye for small details this is why few husbands can lie to their wives and get away with it and why, conversely, many women can pull the wool over a man's eye without his realizing it. It is also believed to be the reason why women often become more perceptive and skilled negotiator than men.

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Incomplete text

The fact that women are generally more perceptive than men has given rise to what is commonly known as women's intuition. This quality particular evident in women have brought up young children, a mother have young child rely large nonverbal channels for communication. Thus many women develop ability pick up decipher nonverbal signals, as well as accurate eye small details. This why few husband can lie their wife get away with it and why converse many women can pull the wool over a man's eye without his realize it. It is also believe to the reason why women often become more percept and skill negotiator than men.

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