The Effect of Reading-Based Pre-Writing Activities on the Writing Performance in an EFL Setting

Omid Tabatabaei

English Department, Najafabad Branch,
Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

Hamed Amin Ali

English Department, Najafabad Branch,
Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

Abstract: *The relationship between reading and writing has long been recognized, and it is agreed that reading and writing cannot be separated (Castellani, 2001). This study aimed to examine whether utilizing different reading tasks, as pre-writing activities, could improve both pre and post-intermediate EFL learners' comprehension and writing. More specifically, it addressed the question whether using the compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution reading tasks would have any effect on EFL learners writing performance. In addition, this study aimed to determine if there is any significant difference between reading task types (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) and their effect on writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners. To this end, a total of 120 EFL pre and post-intermediate learners from one of the English Institutes of Isfahan participated in this study. The students were given various reading texts in three phases on the basis of their levels to read carefully and to write summaries. Statistical analyses of the data revealed three important findings. First, administering different reading tasks as pre-writing activities significantly improved the writing performance of both pre and post-intermediate EFL learners. Second, there was a difference between the effect of various reading tasks on EFL learners writing performance. Third, post-intermediate group had a better performance in writing after using such reading tasks. The findings may add new information to L2 research on writing performance, and pedagogically speaking, the findings of the study may have implications for EFL teachers and students.*

Key Words: *schema, reading tasks, writing, task*

1. Introduction

Krashen's (1985) 'Input Hypothesis' states that we acquire language by understanding messages or obtaining comprehensible input; it accounts for the success of programs in which students acquire a second language through the comprehensible presentation of subject matter in the second language and argues that the key factor determining acquisition of competence in an L2 is exposure to large amounts of meaningful, interesting or relevant L2 input material. Krashen (1989) studied the power of reading on language acquisition on the basis of reading becomes comprehensible input provided that texts are both interesting and understandable so that they capture the learners' attention. His research on reading exposure supports the view that it increases not only reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, but it also improves grammatical development and writing style.

Through reading we have the opportunity of being exposed to well-organized and well-written pieces of writing which help us to improve our language abilities and to build writing schemata. Through writing we acquire the habit of expressing our ideas in a clear, correct and coherent way, fulfilling a double purpose: to be a medium of communication with others and a means of personal intellectual growth. We cannot forget that writing shows off the competence gained by the student and helps him to correct himself and improve his level of language competence. "Writing is, however, a powerful intellectual tool for cognitive

development – it can make you smarter. …Writing enables us to explore and change the worlds of ideas and experiences the brain creates" (Krashen, 1987 p. 116).

Reading and writing interaction has received considerable attention from theorists, researchers and practitioners (Baker & Boonkit, 2004; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Salthouse, 1996; Shannhan, 1988; Tierney & Pearson, 1983).Findings of research in L2 reading and writing echo each other to a large degree. Many researchers point out that successful L2 readers and writers use similar strategies. For example, successful readers and writers do not use strategies hierarchically or linearly, but interactively in reading and recursively in writing (Carrell, 1983; Zamel, 1992).   In contrast, according to Leki (1997), less successful readers and writers seem to do the same thing. They access the text on the page rather than the meaning potential of that text, the forms of the letters and words rather than the overarching connections between them.

The concept of 'task' has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment. Pedagogically, task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices:
• A needs-based approach to content selection.
• An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
• The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
• The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
• An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
• The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

Tasks have been defined by different researchers (Long, 1985; Richards, Platt & Webber, 1986; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2006), in various ways. Nunan (2006, p. 5, as cited in Tabatabaei, 2009) defines a task as:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.

The Meyer model of text analysis has been applied by a great number of researchers (Kintsch & Yarbrough, 1982; McGee, 1982; Taylor and Samuels, 1983; Carrell, 1983; Richgels, McGee, Loman, and Sheard, 1987; Golden, Haslett, and Gauntt, 1988; Goh, 1990; Salager-Meyer, 1991). Their findings suggest that various text organization types (collection, causation, response, comparison, and description) have a significant effect on comprehension and that texts with a better or more natural structure enhance comprehension (also see Dixon, Hultsch, Sinon, and van Eye, 1984; Urquhart, 1984).

Therefore, the present study aimed at investigating the probable relationship between the reading task types utilized as pre-writing activities and writing performance of EFL learners, and also to investigate the effect of learners' level of proficiency on their performance in writing.

2. Background

Different people use the term "reading" in different ways. However, no one single definition tells the complexity inherent in the ability to read (Grabe, 2002). According to McNeil (1992), reading comprehension is making sense out of texts. Although writers structure texts for their given purposes, readers interpret what they read in order to arrive at their own construction of what the text means to them.   Heilman, Blair, and Rupley (1998) defined reading as the active process of constructing meaning from written text in relation to the experiences and knowledge of the reader. Grabe (2002) suggested the following five abilities should be seen as definitional for reading: a rapid and automatic

process, an interacting process, a flexible and strategic process, a purposeful process, and a linguistic process. As far as reading comprehension is concerned, Grabe (2004) suggested that it "implies processing efficiency, language knowledge, strategic awareness, extensive practice in reading, cognitive resources in working memory to allow critical reflection, and appropriate purposes for reading" (Grabe, 2004, p. 19).

In second language acquisition research, there is no single definition for "task." This is because the study of tasks has been approached from different perspectives and for different purposes. As Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) pointed out, definitions of "tasks" are generally "context-free," which may lead to the fact that tasks are viewed differently depending on the different perspectives. Some researchers define tasks in terms of their usefulness for collecting data and eliciting samples of learners' language for research purposes. Example is Pica (1991) who defined tasks as a way to meet criteria for information control, information flow and goals of the study.

Some other researchers look at tasks from a purely classroom interaction point of view. For example, tasks are viewed as products (Horowitz, 1986) or "real academic assignments" situated in a disciplinary context (Swales, 1990). Crookes (1986) defined a task as "a piece of work or activity, usually of a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course or at work" (p. 1). Willis (1996) defined a classroom task as "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome" (p. 53). Nunan (1989) regarded tasks as classroom work which "involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10).

The third type of definition is from the perspectives of both the classroom and of research. Skehan (1996) viewed classroom and L2 research tasks as activities which have meaning as their primary focus and generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use, and success on the task is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome. Ellis's (2003, p. 9-10) definition includes all the above-mentioned aspects listed by Skehan. Besides, Ellis mentions "a workplan for learner activity," which "requires learners to employ cognitive processes," and "can involve any of the four language skills." Based on the different definitions of "tasks" and the purpose of the present study, which was to examine how writing could be used to improve students' reading comprehension, the researcher defines tasks from the perspective of classroom interaction. Reading tasks in this study refer to the activities or work plan involved in the reading classroom.

The types of texts have been claimed by many researchers to be one variable that needs to be explored in L2 reading. Examples are Alderson (2000), Brantmeier (2005), Grabe (1988), Olson (2003) and Perfetti (1997). In order to help students have rich opportunities to get access to different kinds of texts, Olson (2003) suggested teachers provide students with opportunities to read and write a variety of styles. Similarly, Hinkel (2006) suggested that teachers select readings from a wide array of genres, such as narrative, exposition or argumentation. There are two reasons for this. First, based on the text being read, practice in text analysis can become a useful springboard for an instructional focus on the specific uses of grammar structures and contextualized vocabulary. Second, instruction can address the features of written register by bringing learners' attention to the situational variables of language in context.

According to Shanklin (1982), writing is a process of "interactive and dynamic activation, instantiation and refinement of schemata" (p. 89). The same as reading, writing is a complex, multifaceted processing. It requires extensive practice and assistance with tasks across various genres, and consistent exposure to a wide range of texts and tasks (Grabe, 2004). Much like reading, writing calls for efficient cognitive processes, such as planning, organizing, comprehending, integrating, and critiquing.

Depending on readers' and writers' goals, intentions and circumstances, the reading-writing relationship is understood as negotiation (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). In essence, writing is an

activity that is informed by reading, whereas it influences reading as learners become more proficient in their language use (Jabbour, 2004).

3. Statement of the Problem

Once EFL students reach upper-level courses, it is often assumed that they are fully proficient speakers, readers, and writers of the foreign language. However, the fact is that very few students meet this assumed standard of proficiency in upper-level courses, and many students are unable to understand the assigned texts (Redmann, 2005).

   Blame is sometimes placed on lower-level teachers for their failing to teach the necessary grammar and vocabulary, or on students for their failing to devote the necessary time and efforts to reading. As a matter of fact, what the EFL students often lack is experience with the target language. Therefore, rather than assuming students as proficient in English, upper-grade teachers may devise various tasks to help the students get more experience in the target language and thus become proficient readers. Furthermore, Roe, Smith, and Burns (2005) pointed out that tasks for reading become increasingly complex as students advance through grades. Thus, continual attention must be given to the reading tasks assigned to the EFL learners with different levels of proficiency.

   Based on the EFL learners' problems in writing on the one hand, and the strong connections between reading and writing on the other , one way to improve the students' writing performance might be to introduce different reading tasks as pre-writing activities into writing classrooms. The present study has been motivated by concerns over difficulties that learners appeared to encounter in developing writing ability in an EFL context.

4. Research Questions

The following questions have been addressed in this study:

1- Do various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) have any significant effect on the writing performance of pre-intermediate EFL learners?
2- Do various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) have any significant effect on the writing performance of post-intermediate EFL learners?
3- Is there any significant difference between reading task types (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) and their effect on writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners?

5. Research Hypotheses

H01: Various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) do not have any significant effect on the writing performance of pre-intermediate EFL learners.

H02: Various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) do not have any significant effect on the writing performance of post-intermediate EFL learners.

H03: There is not any significant difference between reading task types (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) and their effect on writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners.

6. Methodology

This study was conducted with 120 female and male students of English at pre-intermediate and post-intermediate level in one of the English institutes of Isfahan. They were between 15 and 25 years old and all of them were Persian native speakers. These participants were selected from a whole population pool of 180 based on their performance on the standard Oxford placement test.

In the pre-task phase, the 60 participants who had been selected as the pre-intermediate level were given a reading text selected from the book *'Pre-intermediate Select Readings'* which has especially been written for students at the pre-intermediate level of proficiency. The aim of utilizing such reading text was to determine the participants level of writing.

The participants were asked to read the text first and then to write a summary of whatever they have understood. The topic of the text was '*The Book of The Future'*.

The 60 participants who had been selected as the post-intermediate level were given a reading text titled *'Stress and Illness',* selected from the book '*Academic Encounters'* which contained reading texts suitable for post-intermediate students.

In the main-task phase, four types of reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, problem/solution) were selected to be used. Eight reading texts were selected from proper sources. Two sets of four reading texts, one of which for pre-intermediate participants, and the other set for post-intermediate participants. For each level of participants, four reading texts have been used.

Finally, for the post-task phase, the reading texts were selected from two suitable sources. For pre-intermediate level, the reading texts were selected from *'Pre-intermediate Select Readings'* book, and for the post-intermediate level, the texts were selected form '*Academic Encounters'* book.

To help students successfully tackle and understand the passage better, they were provided with the following supportive tools:
- Vocabulary meanings
- Explanations for each reading task types

7. Data Analysis

7.1. Results regarding the effect of various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) on the writing performance of pre-intermediate EFL learners

The first research question focuses on whether or not different reading tasks have any effect on low proficient EFL learners' writing performance.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, pre-intermediate level

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	48.75	60	3.838	.496
	posttest	58.97	60	4.514	.583

As Table 1 indicates, the mean score in pre-test, is 48.75, and the mean score in post-test is 58.97. According to the difference between these two mean scores, there is an improvement in post-test scores in comparison with the scores in pre-test. In order to see whether the difference was statistically significant or not, a *t*-test was used, whose results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired samples test, difference between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test in pre-intermediate group

Paired Samples Test

					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	pretest - posttest	-10.2	2.585	.334	-10.884	-9.549	-31	59	.000

As Table 2 illustrates, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of pre-intermediate learners on pre-test and their mean scores on post-test, t (59) = 31, p = .000.

7.2. Results regarding the effect of various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) on the writing performance of post-intermediate EFL learners

Table 3. Descriptive statistics, post-intermediate level

Paired Samples Statistics

|		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	33.37	60	3.560	.460
	posttest	41.95	60	3.730	.482

According to Table 3, the mean score in pre-test, for post-intermediate EFL learners, is 33.37, and the mean score in post-test, is 41.95. Looking at two mean scores, 33.37 and 41.95, there is a difference between the performance of post-intermediate learners in pre-test and post-test. In order to see that, the difference is statistically significant, a *t*-test is used whose results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Paired samples test, difference between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test in post-intermediate group

Paired Samples Test

					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	pretest - posttest	8.583	1.960	.253	-9.090	-8.077	-34	59	.000

Table 4 indicates that, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of post-intermediate learners on pre-test and their mean scores on post-test, t (59) = 34, p = .000.
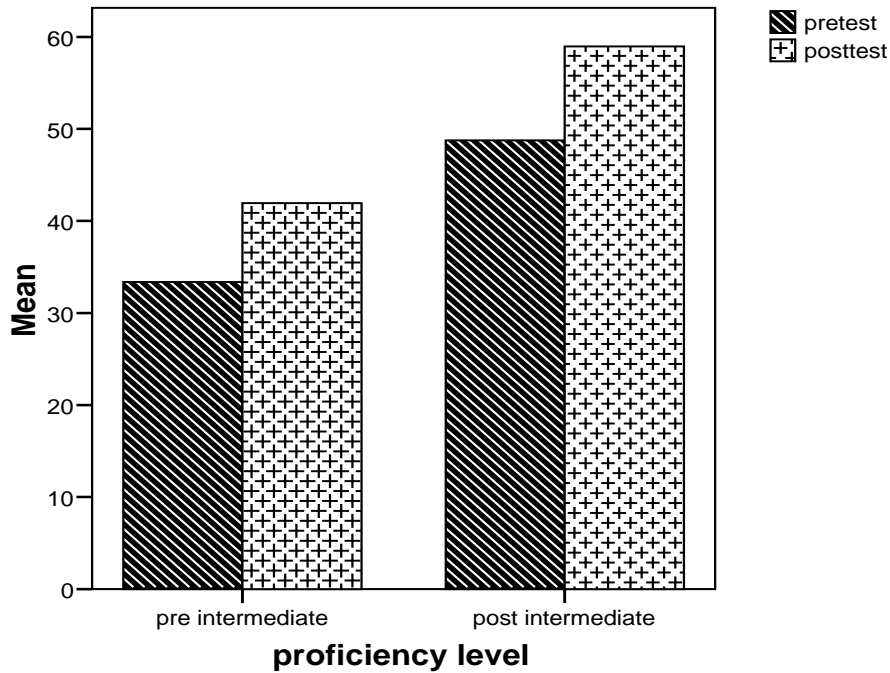
.Figure 1. The performance of pre and post-intermediate level groups in pre-test and post-test

 As this figure shows, both   groups (pre-intermediate, post-intermediate) have improvements in their performance in pre-test and post-test. Figure 1 indicates that administering different reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) have influential role in writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners.

7.3. The difference between reading task types (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) and their effect on writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners

Table 5. Descriptive statistics, the performance of pre-intermediate and post-intermediate EFL learners in conducting four types of reading tasks

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: posttest

proficiency level	task type	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pre intermediate	Compare/Contrast	41.20	3.745	15
	Description	40.13	3.314	15
	Cause/Effect	42.67	3.457	15
	Problem/Solution	43.80	3.649	15
	Total	41.95	3.730	60
post intermediate	Compare/Contrast	57.47	4.138	15
	Description	57.07	3.845	15
	Cause/Effect	61.60	4.222	15
	Problem/Solution	59.73	4.667	15
	Total	58.97	4.514	60
Total	Compare/Contrast	49.33	9.136	30
	Description	48.60	9.306	30
	Cause/Effect	52.13	10.348	30
	Problem/Solution	51.77	9.088	30
	Total	50.46	9.487	120

Table 5 indicates the performance of both pre-intermediate and post-intermediate EFL learners in conducting four types of reading tasks. It shows that, the mean scores of pre-intermediate and post-intermediate EFL learners in compare/contrast task are 41.20 and 57.47, in description task are 40.13 and 57.07, in cause/effect task are 42.67 and 61.60, and in problem/solution task is 43.80 and 59.73 respectively.

Table 6. Levene's Test

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances [a]

Dependent Variable: posttest

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.339	7	112	.935

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

[a.] Design: Intercept+proficiency+tasktype+proficiency * tasktype

Table 7. Two-way ANOVA, the difference between the writing performance of pre-intermediate and post-intermediate groups

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: posttest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	9004.725[a]	7	1286.389	84.499	.000	.841
Intercept	305525.208	1	305525.208	0068.906	.000	.994
proficiency	8687.008	1	8687.008	570.620	.000	.836
tasktype	277.092	3	92.364	6.067	.001	.140
proficiency * taskty	40.625	3	13.542	.890	.449	.023
Error	1705.067	112	15.224			
Total	316235.000	120				
Corrected Total	10709.792	119				

[a.] R Squared = .841 (Adjusted R Squared = .831)

As it is mentioned in Table 7, the proficiency sig. score is .000. This indicates that, in this study the performance of post-intermediate EFL learners was totally better than the performance of pre-intermediate EFL learners, $f(1,112) = 570.620$, $p = .000$. In addition, task type sig. score is .001 (.001<.05). It means that, there was a difference between the performance of EFL learners in different reading tasks. Finally the sig. score of proficiency task type is .449 (.449<.05). As a result, the interaction between proficiency level and task type effect is not significant or in another words, the effectiveness of four types of tasks on the writing performance of both groups (pre-intermediate and post-intermediate) is equal.

Table 8. Post Hoc Tests, the difference between reading task types effects on pre and post-intermediate EFL learners writing performance

Task type

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: posttest

Scheffe

(I) task type	(J) task type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Compare/Contras	Description	.73	1.007	.912	-2.13	3.59
	Cause/Effect	-2.80	1.007	.057	-5.66	.06
	Problem/Solution	-2.43	1.007	.126	-5.29	.43
Description	Compare/Contras	-.73	1.007	.912	-3.59	2.13
	Cause/Effect	-3.53*	1.007	.008	-6.39	-.67
	Problem/Solution	-3.17*	1.007	.023	-6.03	-.31
Cause/Effect	Compare/Contras	2.80	1.007	.057	-.06	5.66
	Description	3.53*	1.007	.008	.67	6.39
	Problem/Solution	.37	1.007	.988	-2.49	3.23
Problem/Solution	Compare/Contras	2.43	1.007	.126	-.43	5.29
	Description	3.17*	1.007	.023	.31	6.03
	Cause/Effect	-.37	1.007	.988	-3.23	2.49

Based on observed means.

*· The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

In table 8, the effect of reading task types on the writing performance of learners has been compared in groups of two. Looking at all scores, it is obvious that the effect of utilizing cause/effect and problem/solution is more tangible in writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners.

8. Discussion

To answer the first question, the analysis results shows that, using such tasks in the field of writing can be very effective on pre-intermediate level's writing performance. As the results show, the mean score in pre-test is 48.75, and according to the difference between these two mean scores, 48.75 and 58.97 , there is an improvement in post-test marks in comparison with the marks in pre-test. In order to see whether the difference is statistically significant or not, a *t*-test is used. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Kobayashi's (1995) study. In his study, reading tasks such as association, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution had been used to see whether utilizing such tasks had any effect on the writing performance of pre-intermediate learners and the obtained results are exactly in conformity with the findings of the present study.

As it is obvious in Table 9, for post-intermediate EFL learners, the mean score in pre-test is 33.37, and the mean score in post-test is 41.95. It indicates that, utilizing different reading task types in this study has been influential in writing performance of such levels. This result is in accordance with the results of Meyer's (1985), and Kobayashi's (1995). In Meyer (1985), and Kobayashi (1995) three types of reading tasks

(Description, Cause/Effect, and Problem/Solution) utilized in this study have been used except compare/contrast reading task. The results obtained from these two studies show that utilizing such reading tasks have significant effect on the writing performance of post-intermediate learners, and these findings are completely obvious in the finding of the present study.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics, post-intermediate level

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	33.37	60	3.560	.460
	posttest	41.95	60	3.730	.482

Regarding the probable difference between reading task types (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) and their effect on writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners, as it is mentioned in Table 10, there is significant difference between these reading task types and their effect on pre and post-intermediate EFL learners writing performance. The results show that, post-intermediate EFL learners had better performance in utilizing reading tasks and their writing performance in comparison with pre-intermediate EFL learners. In addition, the effect of all reading tasks on both levels writing performance was almost the same. The results show that the effect of two reading tasks (Cause/Effect, Problem/solution) on pre and post-intermediate EFL learners writing performance is more than the effect of other reading task called description. The findings mentioned in this part are in accordance with the findings of Meyer (1985), and Kobayashi (1995) studies. The results obtained from these two studies show that the effect of two reading tasks, cause/effect and problem/solution, is more than the effect of description reading task. The reason of such similar results maybe is that, the features of cause/effect and problem/solution reading tasks are really close together, and the performance of EFL learners of both pre and post-intermediate levels in comprehending such reading tasks is significantly better than comprehending the descriptive reading tasks.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics, the performance of pre-intermediate and post-intermediate EFL learners in conducting four types of reading tasks

Descriptive Statistics

Dependent Variable: posttest

proficiency level	task type	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
pre intermediate	Compare/Contrast	41.20	3.745	15
	Description	40.13	3.314	15
	Cause/Effect	42.67	3.457	15
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post intermediate	Compare/Contrast	57.47	4.138	15
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	Total	58.97	4.514	60
Total	Compare/Contrast	49.33	9.136	30
	Description	48.60	9.306	30
	Cause/Effect	52.13	10.348	30
	Problem/Solution	51.77	9.088	30
	Total	50.46	9.487	120

9. Conclusion

In this study, two main objectives have been addressed. The first objective is that, if various reading tasks (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) used as pre-writing activities have any significant effect on the writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners, and the second one is that if there is any significant difference between reading task types (compare/contrast, description, cause/effect, and problem/solution) and their effect on writing performance of pre and post-intermediate EFL learners. The findings of this study indicated that, utilizing different reading task types as pre-writing activities, have significant effects on pre and post-intermediate EFL learners writing performance.

Regarding the second main objective of this study, the statistical results indicated that, post-intermediate EFL learners had better performance, using different reading tasks, in writing in comparison with pre-intermediate EFL learners. Furthermore, the effect of utilizing different reading tasks on both pre and post-intermediate learners writing performance was almost the same but the effect of two reading tasks, cause/effect and problem/solution, is more tangible in comparison with the effect of other two reading tasks, description and compare/contrast.

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