Cultivating Iranian High School Students' Writing Skills through Task-Based Language Teaching: A Mixed-Methods Study[1]

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study attempts to explore the effects of TBLT on the development of Iranian high school students' writing skills. To this end, two entire classes were selected in Shahed high school in Borujerd City, Iran. The groups went through pre-test, intervention, post-test, and delayed post-test procedures. In addition, using a classroom observation checklist, the researchers checked how much of the TBLT tenets can be implemented in real classes, and a focus group interview was used to further investigate the students' perceptions about the effectiveness of TBLT. The collected data were analyzed through repeated measures: ANOVA, a calculation of percentage, and content analysis. Findings showed a statistically significant difference between the experimental group and control group in relationship to their writing skills. Moreover, the results of the classroom observation checklist disclosed that the principles and procedures of TBLT were implementable in Iranian high school classes. Furthermore, the findings of the focus group interview revealed that the participants have positive attitudes toward TBLT. Finally, a range of implications is suggested for the different stakeholders.

Resumen

Este estudio de métodos mixtos intenta explorar los efectos de TBLT en el desarrollo de las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes de secundaria iraníes. Con este fin, se seleccionaron dos clases íntegras en la escuela secundaria Shahed en la ciudad de Borujerd, Irán. Los grupos pasaron por procedimientos de pre-prueba, intervención, post-prueba y post-prueba diferida. Además, utilizando una lista de verificación de observación en el aula, los investigadores comprobaron cuántos de los principios TBLT se pueden implementar en clases reales, y se utilizó una entrevista de grupo focal para investigar más a fondo las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la eficacia de TBLT. Los datos recolectados fueron analizados a través de medidas repetidas: ANOVA, cálculo de porcentaje y análisis de contenido. Los resultados mostraron una diferencia estadísticamente significativa entre el grupo experimental y el grupo de control en relación con sus habilidades de escritura. Además, los resultados de la lista de verificación de observación en el aula revelaron que los principios y procedimientos de TBLT se pudieron implementar en las clases de secundaria iraníes. Además, los hallazgos de la entrevista del grupo focal revelaron que los participantes tienen actitudes positivas hacia TBLT. Finalmente, se explican implicaciones para los diferentes actores.

Introduction

Since the middle of the 20th century, there has been an increasing demand for learning English from all age groups. This, in turn, has caused abundant budget, effort, and time to be spent on its instruction all over the world (Wong & Dubey-Jhaveri, 2015). Due to this ever-growing demand, applied linguists have worked to bring about about positive shifts into traditional second language (L2) pedagogies (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In addition, as the traditional L2 teaching methods (e.g., Grammar-Translation and Audiolingualism) could not adequately meet the needs of L2 learners (Nunan, 2004), the scene was set to introduce communicative approaches, such as task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Widdowson, 1990).

As an educational framework, TBLT uses tasks to facilitate learning. According to Mackey and Goo (2007), when tasks are used as the unit of learning, L2 learners can improve the input comprehensibility through the negotiation of meaning and modify their productions in light of their peers' feedback. There are some central factors to the success of TBLT, including task design, task implementation, task sequence, and task complexity (García Mayo, 2007; Robinson, 2005; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2012; Skehan, 1998; Skehan, 2021). However, it should be noted that there has not been a broad consensus over the effectiveness of TBLT in different contexts (Baralt et al., 2014; Leaver & Willis, 2004).

In the Iranian EFL context, there has been a growing number of complaints about the inefficiency of the traditional L2 methods (Naghdipour, 2016; Rahimi & Rezaee, 2020). In response, communicative approaches, such as TBLT, have been introduced. However, they are hardly ever used in real classes. It seems that a large part of this reservation is rooted in the lack of well-organized research to provide strong findings on the effects of TBLT on Iranian EFL students' communicative competence. Hence, this gap was the impetus for the present mixed-methods study to study the effects of TBLT on the development of Iranian high school students' writing.

Literature Review

Theoretical foundations of TBLT

TBLT is an offspring of communicative language teaching (CLT) with the same theoretical foundations (Moore, 2018). As such, TBLT is built on the underlying assumption that communication is the major driving force of L2 learning (Howatt, 1984). According to Samuda and Bygate (2008) and Long (2015), both CLT and TBLT approaches have been adjusted to 'experiential learning theory,' where the main claim is that effective learning is achieved by doing a task. Furthermore, as Moore (2018) puts it, two comprehensive views regard interaction as the primary driving force of TBLT: cognitive processing view, which considers the impact of "manipulating the task rubric and the implementation conditions on learner language production;" and the sociocultural view, which support "the task [as a] process, especially concerning how learner agency and context influence interaction, language production, and the shared creation of learning opportunities" (Moore, 2018, pp. 3-4).

Vital services of TBLT to language education

In the literature, several advantages of TBLT have been listed. For example, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) maintained that compared to the traditional L2 approaches, TBLT was more productive since it concurrently provided both form and interaction basis. Nunan (2003, 2004) asserted that TBLT was successful due to its emphasis on language use in achieving authentic objectives and involving L2 learners in meaningful communicative interactions. He also underlined the connection of L2 learners' needs and interests to TBLT, which evokes the required language skills use even outside the classroom by activating the cognitive learning processes of L2 learners through the use of real-world tasks (Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 2003). Finally, other merits of TBLT include boosting L2 learners' motivation, providing opportunities to practice without monotony, underlining how to learn, enhancing risk-taking, and increasing L2 learners' contentment (Leaver & Kaplan, 2004; Sasayama, 2021; Willis & Willis, 2007).

The significance of writing in EFL classrooms

With the development of globalization, different people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have been involved in constant long-distance written communication (Naghdipour, 2016). This phenomenon has been accelerated and extended owing to modern internet technologies. From this perspective, the concept of writing, as Hyland (2006) notes, has become tied to communicative purposes and social interactions. However, considering its importance, writing is a complex, demanding skill for EFL/ESL learners (Hyland, 2006; Richards, 1990). English language learners need to be trained to develop concurrently various aspects of writing skills, including "grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, paragraph organization, cohesion, and coherence" (Harmer, 2007, p. 86).

In addition, the writing activities can be seen in a continuum that ranges from 'controlled writing' to 'real writing' (Harmer, 2007). Specifically, *real writing* deals with the authenticity and process-based approach of writing skill instruction. From TBLT perspectives, *authenticity* refers to real-world tasks, which encourage L2 to emulate real-world experiences to solve the problems presented in the task (Ozverir et al., 2017), and the *process-based approach*, as Hedgcock (2005) asserted, involves L2 learners in different stages of editing and reviewing before delivering their final products. Hence, in the current study, the process-based approach in line with the tenets of TBLT was employed.

Empirical studies on teaching writing using TBLT

Here, several studies will be critically reviewed to set the scene for the current study. Through TBLT, Shin and Kim (2014) investigated the effects of independent or integrated tasks on EFL learners' writing performance. The results indicated that owing to the two types of tasks, the participants' writing performance improved in terms of syntactic complexity, cohesion, and lexical sophistication.

In another study, Zhang (2016) examined the writing development of Chinese students using integrated tasks and corrective feedback. The findings showed that although no significant difference was observed in the Chinese-reading-English-writing group in content, and organization scores, there was a significant correlation between content, and language alignment in English-reading-English-writing group. McDonough and Crawford (2020) also studied Thai EFL learners' writing development through two writing tasks and their level of familiarity with the task using the analytic rubric and linguistic features. The results showed that the learners who were more familiar with the tasks scored better.

In the Iranian EFL context, Rahimpour et al. (2011) investigated how task structure affected written task performance. To this aim, Iranian EFL learners (n=30) were asked to narrate two tasks that differed in terms of their inherent structure (tight vs. loose). The findings revealed that structured tasks had a very huge effect on the fluency and complexity of the written performances of the participants while the accuracy was not improved. Also, Sotoudehnama and Maleki Jebelli (2014) studied the effect of sentence writing as the post-task of an activity designed to strengthening the effect of noticing. The findings showed that providing post tasks was significantly effective in promoting the productive knowledge of the groups under study. In another study, Hashemi et al. (2008) attempted to analyze EFL writing tasks in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) exam preparation courses in Iran. The results indicated that the groups obtained significant differences about the quality of writing procedures. Finally, Kafipour et al. (2018) investigated the effects of implementing task-based writing instruction on Iranian EFL learners' writing competence. The results showed significant improvement in learners' writing ability, such as language use, content, and sentence mechanics.

Hence, there seems to be a need for Iranian high school English books to be systematically redesigned through the real needs of students in English writing. As Naghdipour (2016) notes, "English language education in [Iran] appears to follow a truncated curriculum in that it ignores productive language learning skills, such as speaking and writing" (p. 83). To address this issue, it is essential to introduce and implement communicative approaches with firm theoretical foundations, such as TBLT in the Iranian EFL context.

Due to this gap, the researchers decided to investigate the effectiveness of TBLT in developing the writing skills of Iranian high school students both quantitatively and qualitatively. To meet these goals, the following research questions were put forward:

1. *Does TBLT significantly lead to cultivating the Iranian high school students' writing skills?*
2. *Does TBLT significantly result in improving Iranian high school students' writing skills in terms of long-term ability?*
3. *Can the principles and procedures of TBLT be implemented to teach writing skills in the Iranian high school classes?*
4. *What are the Iranian high school students' perceptions about the effectiveness of TBLT on the cultivation of their writing skills?*

Method

Research design

The current study used a concurrent mixed-method since the required data were simultaneously collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The underlying reason for mingling these two approaches was triangulation. Triangulation, as Riazi (2016) notes, provides valuable opportunities for researchers to identify aspects of a phenomenon more systematically by approaching it from different dimensions using different methods and techniques. Hence, the present study was designed to investigate the effects of TBLT on the development of the Iranian high school students' writing skills using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Participants and setting

The present study was carried out at Shahed public high school in Borujerd City, Iran, during the autumn 2019 semester. Two second-year classes were selected and randomly assigned as experimental group (n = 21) and control group (n = 23). The participants were all female, aged from 16 to 17 years old. Given that English language teaching at schools in Iran is centralized, in terms of curricular goals and objectives, the Iranian high school students hardly ever find opportunities to use English for spoken or written communication purposes (Naghdipour, 2016). It should be noted that the study was based on the official public high school third-grade coursebook to assure that they were not already familiar with paragraph writing skills. However, before the research began, the researchers gave the students the Preliminary English Test (PET) to assess their linguistic homogeneity. There were no discernible language proficiency distinctions between the two groups, according to the independent t-test results t (42) = .67, p = .50 > .05. It needs to be noted that the reading and listening sections of the tests were deleted for practical reasons, and the researchers only focused on "writing" and "speaking" responses.

To observe ethical requirements, the students were allowed to withdraw their names if they did not want to take part in the research for whatever reason. Also, the researchers explained the objectives and procedures to the school principal, English teachers, and the students in detail. The students were then given a consent form in Persian, which their parents were required to sign. Finally, assurances were given to the school's

principal, English teachers, students, and their parents that the study's results would stay private and that they would be made aware of the results.

Instruments

Writing tests

One of the major instruments used in this study were the writing tests. Three parallel writing tests were run as a pre-test to measure the students' writing ability prior to the instruction, a post-test to gauge the students writing ability immediately after the intervention, and a delayed post-test to assess the students' writing performance in terms of long-term retention of the ability. It should be noted that the topics of the writings were selected from the students' coursebooks, and the students were given 45 minutes to write a paragraph about the topics.

Classroom observation checklist

Classroom observation is a qualitative data collection approach in which researchers can be either participant-observers or non-participant observers. According to Bryman (2008), class observation can be of three types: structured, semi-structured or unstructured. In the current study, the researchers employed structured observation and took the role of a non-participant observer. In fact, a classroom observation checklist was designed based on the previous research found in the literature (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Long, 2015; Nunan, 2003, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Skehan, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). Regarding the validity of the observation, after reviewing the related literature, the researchers developed a primary draft with diverse items dealing with the tenets of TBLT. Then, two well-experienced university professors in applied linguistics at Lorestan University were consulted to read and comment on the items. In line with their comments, the vague items were either modified or removed from the final version of the checklist. The items, then, were designed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (unsatisfactory), 2 (below average), 3 (average), 4 (average), to 5 (outstanding). In general, the observation checklist included the following items:

1. The instruction is highly motivating and promotes student confidence;
2. The writing activities provide opportunities for real-world language use;
3. The students make use of other skills to accomplish a writing task;
4. In the writing tasks, the primary focus is on meaning;
5. In the writing tasks, there is some kind of 'gap' that encourages the students to write about it and express their own opinions;
6. The class run in a student-centered way, and students practice writing in groups in a cooperative climate;
7. In the writing activities, the focus on form is contextualized;
8. Feedback is provided through self-correct and other students;
9. The writing tasks are goal/outcome-oriented; and
10. The students report their performance, targeting the linguistic form.

Focus group interview

In order to triangulate the data and study students' perceptions about the effects of TBLT on their writing skills, a focus group interview was administered with seven students from the experimental group who had received the instruction based on TBLT tenets. The participation was voluntary, and the students signed an informed consent form before the interview. During the interview, the students expressed their experience of TBLT intervention and its impact on their writing performance. The focus group interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed meticulously through content analysis approach. It is worthy to note that it was carried out at the end of the instruction period and lasted around two hours; students were permitted to use their mother tongue (Persian) to express their perceptions.

Rubric writing

The other instrument was Rubric Writing (RW). It was designed and developed based on the framework presented by Nunan (2004). RW evaluated writing in terms of content, organization, language, and task requirement (See Appendix 1). Each of these traits was rated as: 1) Does not meet 0; 2) Partially meet 1; 3) Does not fully meet 2; 4) Meet 3; 5) More than meets 4; 6) Exceeds 5. Hence, the participants' compositions were scored from 0 to 20.

Data collection procedures

The following steps were taken to carry out the study. One of the investigators who was an assistant professor of applied linguistics at the university initially conducted a mini-workshop for the instructor and

students in the experimental group on the methodology and principles of TBLT with a focus on writing abilities. The researcher gave an in-depth, interactive explanation of TBLT over the course of three sessions, using real-world examples to show how it differs from conventional language teaching approaches and how it might be applied in English language classes. Based on the reflections taken from the teacher, it was assured that he had learned and internalized the tenets of TBLT. Next, prior to the treatment phase, the researchers recruited two well-experienced professors majoring in TEFL to score the students' writing papers. For this, having the scripts of the two classes scrambled before scoring, the raters double scored the writing papers. Cohen's Kappa was used to determine if there was an agreement between judges on scoring scripts in time points. There was a moderate agreement between judges in all stages: pre-test $k = 0.59$; post-test $k = 0.61$; delayed post-test $k = 0.65$, $p = 0.05$.

During the next phase, the treatments were offered to the two groups. The treatment phase lasted 15 sessions, held for 90 minutes twice a week for both groups. A typical writing lesson following Grower et al. (1995) was comprised of distinct steps. The first step was *introduction* (about ten minutes), in which the teacher tried to stimulate the students' interest and activate their background knowledge through an audio clip, reading text, a short video, or a short story. The second step was *working with ideas* (about ten minutes), in which the teacher tried to extract the required ideas and organize them with the help of the students. The third step was *planning to write* (about ten minutes) wherein the teacher provided a model of the intended paragraph and highlighted its typical features and structures (e.g., topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences). *Drafting* (about fifteen minutes) was the next stage followed. The teacher encouraged the learners to write the first draft in pairs from their notes and plans. To complete this part, the students were recommended to consult dictionaries, grammar reference books, and model paragraphs for some conventions. The fifth step was *reviewing and drafting* (about twenty minutes). This was the time for the students to edit and improve their first draft. In this stage, the teacher provided as much as he could indirect corrective feedback on the students' writings. In the last step, *reviewing* (about fifteen minutes), the students wrote out the final version and gave it to the teacher to evaluate.

In relation to the control group, they were instructed based on the traditional approaches, in which there were no pre-stage activities. The students were only given a topic at the beginning of the session, and they were asked to write about it as much as possible without receiving any systematic, principled instruction.

Next, the post-test writing was administered to both groups (control and experimental to discover the effects of TBLT on the students' writing skills. Finally, three weeks later, the delayed post-test was also implemented.

The qualitative data collection procedures incorporated two distinct approaches. The first approach was class observation using the checklist. In doing the class observation, one of the researchers sat at the back of the classroom of the experimental class, observed the class activities with care, and checked the class activities based on the checklist items. It is worth noting that to ameliorate the side effect of the researcher's presence on both the teacher and students' behaviors, the researcher started recording the class in the third session. In the end, the focus group interview was run at the end of the instruction with seven students of the experimental group.

Data analysis procedures

To analyze the data of the quantitative part, using SPSS version 25, both descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated. Regarding the former, the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for the pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test were calculated. The inferential statistics were calculated through a Repeated Measures ANOVA to identify the differences between the two groups in terms of their gain scores across the three administrations of the tests.

The data collected through the class observation checklist were descriptively analyzed and reported in a percentage. That is, the occurrence of each item during the instruction was marked at each session and changed into a percentage. In addition, the data of the focus group interview were subjected to inductive content analysis. According to Mackey and Gass (2016), content analysis aims at making sense of the content of the interactions of the participants. In doing so, a three-step procedure, namely *open coding*, *axial coding,* and *selective coding* was followed (Glaser, 2011). In the first step, the transcripts were read over and over to get familiar and make enough sense of them. In the second step, the major themes were extracted and detected. The last step was dedicated to putting the perceptions of the participants under the inductively-generated themes. It should be noted that two experts analyzed the data, and an inter-rater reliability of 0.83 was achieved. Member checking was also used to assure the accuracy and credibility of

the participants' responses. The participants were invited to see a copy of their perceptions and assess if they represented their intended meanings.

Results

The results of the quantitative study

The first research question explored if TBLT significantly affected the Iranian high school students' writing skills. To achieve that goal, a repeated-measures ANOVA was run, and the parametric test assumptions were examined in advance. First, the premise of the observations' independence was satisfied because no student attended more than one lesson. Second, as the Sig. values under the Shapiro-Wilk column for both groups were greater than (0.05), control ($p = .40$), and experimental ($p = .52$), it was concluded that the data were normally distributed. Then, the homogeneity of the two groups was checked by using an independent sample t-test (t (42) $= .11$, $p = .90 > .05$). Thus, it was assured that the two groups were homogeneous on the pre-test.

As can be observed in Table 1, the mean scores of the control group ($M = 6.13$) and the experimental group ($M = 6.04$) were, to some extent, the same on the pre-test. However, on the post-test, the mean score of the control group ($M = 9.21$) was much lower than that of the experimental group ($M = 14.66$). The same significant difference was found between the mean scores of the control group ($M = 9.21$) and the experimental group ($M = 14.04$) on the delayed post-test.

	Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Pre	Control	6.13	2.36	23
	Experimental	6.04	2.33	21
	Total	6.09	2.32	44
Post	Control	9.21	1.80	23
	Experimental	14.66	2.47	21
	Total	11.81	3.47	44
Delayed	Control	9.69	2.47	23
	Experimental	14.04	2.41	21
	Total	11.77	3.26	44

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for groups overall writing performance

Table 2 reports that x^2 (2) $= 30.530$, $p = .00 < .05$; that is, the assumption of the Sphericity was not met. Since Sphericity was not assumed, the Green-house-Geisser correction in the 'Tests of Within-Subjects Effects' ANOVA was used to make an adjustment to the degrees of freedom of the repeated-measures ANOVA.

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	P	Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
Time	.48	30.53	2	.00	.65	.67	.50

Table 2: Result of Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

As seen in Table 3, the Tests of Within-Subjects effects table provided an overall significant difference between the means at the different time points. In Table 4, the F value for the 'time' factor, its associated significance level, and effect size are presented. The Greenhouse-Geisser correction documented that there were statistically significant differences between the means of the score writings at three-time points (F (1.31, 56.70) $= 148.33$, $p = .00$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = .77$, which according to (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018) represents a large effect size). Since there was a difference between at least two time points, the main ANOVA is significant.

	Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	MS	F	P	η_p^2
Time	Sphericity Assumed	954.60	2	477.30	148.33	.000	.77
	Greenhouse-Geisser	954.60	1.31	723.87	148.33	.000	.77
	Huynh-Feldt	954.60	1.34	710.20	148.33	.000	.77
	Lower-bound	954.60	1.00	954.60	148.33	.000	.77
Error(time)	Sphericity Assumed	276.72	86	3.21			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	276.72	56.70	4.88			
	Huynh-Feldt	276.72	57.79	4.78			
	Lower-bound	276.72	43.00	6.43			

Table 3: Test of within subject effects for writing performances

While the results presented above indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the means of the two groups, it was not obvious where the differences originated. To this aim, the Bonferroni post hoc test was run, and the results are reported in Table 4. As can be seen, there are statistically significant differences between the post-test and pre-test ($MD = 5.72$, $p = 0.00 < .05$), and between the pre-test and delayed test ($MD = 5.682$, $p = 0.00 < .05$). Eventually, it can be concluded that the learners' writing performance improved significantly in the post- and delayed tests.

Time Points		MD	Std. Error	P	95% CI
1	2	-5.72*	.47	.000	[-6.90, -4.55]
	3	-5.68*	.41	.000	[-6.71, -4.65]
2	1	5.72*	.47	.000	[4.55, 6.90]
	3	.04	.21	1.00	[-.48, .57]
3	1	5.68*	.41	.000	[4.65, 6.71]
	2	-.04	.21	1.00	[-.57, .48]

Table 4: Result of Post Hoc comparison for writing performances

In sum, the results of repeated measures ANOVA along with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction showed that the students' writing performances differed statistically among the three-time points ($F (1.319, 56.706) = 148.334$, $p < 0.005$). Post hoc tests using the Bonferroni correction revealed that owing to the intervention of TBLT, the writing performance of the experimental group on the post-test ($M = 14.66$; $SD = 2.476$, $p < 0.001$) and delayed post-test ($M = 14.04$; $SD = 2.418$, $p < 0.001$)) was statistically significantly different from the control group on the post-test ($M = 9.21$; $SD = 1.807$, $p < 0.001$) and delayed test ($M = 9.69$; $SD = 2.475$, $p < 0.001$)).

The results of the qualitative study

Results of class observation checklist

The third research question explored if the principles and procedures of TBLT could be implemented to teach writing skills in Iranian high school classes. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5.

Items	Mean	High	Low	Percentage
1	3.75	5	2	.75
2	3.91	5	1	.78
3	4.16	5	2	.83
4	4.25	5	3	.85
5	4.08	5	2	.81
6	4.33	5	3	.86
7	4.08	5	3	.81
8	3.91	5	2	.78
9	4.08	5	2	.81
10	4.08	5	3	.81

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for class observation items

Based on the observations of employing TBLT in the experimental group class, as can be observed in the Table in Appendix 1, the findings indicate that during a 12-session observation, item 1 (promoting L2 motivation) occurred during 75% of the observation; item 2 (real-world language use) occurred during 78% of the observation; item 3 (using skills to do a task) occurred during 83%; item 4 (focus on meaning) occurred during 85%; item 5 (finding knowledge gap) occurred during 81%; item 6 (practicing cooperatively) occurred during 86%; item 7 (contextualized form) occurred 81%; item 8 (student self-feedback) occurred 78 %; item 9 (outcome-oriented tasks) occurred 81%; and item 10 (reporting form-based performance) occurred 81%. The findings disclosed that, according to the whole-interval observation, almost all the principles and procedures of TBLT were administered with a high percentage in the class.

Qualitative results of the focus group interview

In this section, the results of the interview data analysis are reported to answer the fourth research question. The data analysis yielded some recurring themes, including: 1) meaning is the priority; 2) all language skills should be used; 3) cooperative learning is highly promising; 4) feedback provided through self-correct and other peers is of paramount importance; 5) TBLT was motivating and interesting, and 6) contextualizing the forms is very fruitful.

Theme 1: Meaning is the priority. One of the elements of quality writing classes is prioritizing meaning. In fact, the writing skill has an identity function, and students shape their identity through a combination of

meaning making procedures. As Skehan (1998) maintains, meaning is not created through other people's interaction; instead, it is the byproduct of accomplishing a task. The experiences of some students in regard to their writing skill sessions suggested how inevitable the impact of meaning could be in this process. They reported that the ultimate goal of writing would be accomplished by finishing the task and reaching to a meaningful outcome.

[Interview Excerpt 1, March 10, 2020]

I learned that writing my meanings should be clear for my readers. Otherwise, I cannot achieve my goal in doing the writing task.

Additionally, another student explained his experience of writing classes through TBLT and mentioned that:

[Interview Excerpt 4, March 10, 2020]

Previously, I thought that writing refers to arranging some paragraphs in a well-organized text that all paragraphs should follow the main idea in a mechanical way. But through TBLT program, I figured out that writing goes beyond just knowing procedures of writing. Writing is a way of interacting with the readers that forces the writer to describe the topic under investigation fully in order to convey the specific meaning in his/her mind.

Theme 2: All language skills should be used. TBLT can provide opportunities to reflect the needs of the learners to tackle real-world problems. That is, learners stick to all language skills to identify and approach a problem (Hyland,2006). TBLT helps the learners to consider language learning an integrative experience that uses all the components of a language concurrently to create and make meaning.

[Interview Excerpt 2, March 10, 2020]

During the instruction, we had to use other language skills. For example, we had to read the keywords and chunks written on the board by the teacher or read our peers' writings carefully.

In addition to writing content, the pattern and writing style are important. According to the data, prior to participating in this program, the dominant writing pattern was a topic-based one for students' writing sessions. However, TBLT introduced other mediums of input, enabling learners to consider writing as an integrative skill. In the same vein, one of the students added:

[Interview Excerpt 5, March 10, 2020]

Our writing class in TBLT approach brought up a new way of getting familiar with the writing topic. In TBLT program, we generally started our classes with a piece of listening or reading, describing the topic completely.

Another student told us:

[Interview Excerpt 4, March 10, 2020]

Before TBLT classes, we consider writing classes so boring that no creativity or flexibility was found there. But TBLT provided a combination of all skills. I mean that the writing class was mixed with speaking, listening, and reading materials. So, we both learned and enjoyed by this type of combination of skills

Theme 3: Cooperative learning is highly promising. TBLT stressed students' cooperation in the learning processes by establishing group work involvement to help improve learners' writing skills (Moore, 2018; Nunan, 2004). In this instructional method students work in small groups to accomplish the writing goal under the teacher's supervision. In the TBLT approach, cooperative learning strategies are offered to the students to acquire knowledge in an environment similar to the one they will encounter in their future work life. Based on the students' perceptions, the obvious feature of cooperative learning is the positive interdependence:

[Interview Excerpt 3, March 10, 2020]

In our pairs, we learned that we could learn from each other. I mean, we understood that other peers could be of great help to solve a problem. For example, my experiences over the instruction taught us that we could plan, draft, and edit our writing better with the cooperation of our peers.

Another important aspect of cooperative learning is equal participation. Cooperative learning techniques ensure that each student in each team contributes equally to the final result. As one of the participants told us:

[Interview Excerpt 6, March 10, 2020]

In previous writing classes, only one student was engaged at a time of writing. The students were not interacting to share their ideas and strategies in writing. But, in TBLT, because of students teamwork, each one has specific duty to share and to accomplish the task of writing at the same time.

Theme 4: Feedback provided through self-correct and other peers is of paramount importance. Feedback is frequently seen as a critical component in language pedagogy. Maintaining continuous feedback increases students' motivation, confidence, and engagement. It is also essential to mention that feedback should be from both sides. In other words, students-to-student feedback is just as necessary as teacher-to-student feedback. However, it is still challenging for teachers to organize peer feedback smoothly. Thus, through peer feedback provided by the negotiation of meaning among L2 learners, they can develop and also rectify, as Mackey and Goo (2007) state, their speech comprehension.

[Interview Excerpt 4, March10, 2020]

The time, given by the teacher to assess our writing, was very fruitful in determining our problems and removing them. For example, I realized that my writing was poor with the aspect of punctuation. Then, I tried to give more attention to it at the succeeding sessions.

Also, feedback must include actionable suggestions that allow learners to know how they can improve their work, in addition to tell peers of their faults. This would prevent peer reviews from becoming personal attacks, allowing for self-regulation and improvement chances:

[Interview Excerpt 1, March10, 2020]

Our teacher encouraged us to give workable peer feedback by questions like "Do you have any suggestion how your classmate can improve her writing composition?" or "What strategies can improve this piece of writing?"

Theme 5: TBLT was motivating and interesting. TBLT values learners' participation in doing a task, creating a positive atmosphere that boosts their motivation thoroughly (Bao & Du, 2015). An efficient method recognizes that student motivation is necessary for success in learning. For instance, TBLT combines various learning styles and classroom tasks so that all learners are engaged:

[Interview Excerpt 2, March 10, 2020]

In previous writing classes, teachers prefer to stick to one technique in teaching writing skill, but it is clear that different students prefer different techniques. Fortunately, the TBLT program respected personality styles and provided various types of tasks in order to avoid boredom and tedium.

Besides, TBLT lets students to become familiar with the rules and objectives of the writing class. When the goals and procedures are defined for the students, they can easily achieve the expected outcome. Thus, the students were more motivated with the internal source of the coursebook and their overall attitude towards writing tasks was relatively positive:

[Interview Excerpt 5, March 10, 2020]

The class was really motivating to me. The reason was that we learned how to write a paragraph in a systematic way. When we finished writing a paragraph successfully, a sense of achievement was created, leading us to write more and more.

Also, all students have an underlying belief about learning. TBLT suggests that a learner can cultivate abilities that are developing and struggling their mindset. Students with a changing mindset are more motivated to work hard. As one of the students added:

[Interview Excerpt 6, March 10, 2020]

In our TBLT writing classes, the teacher always praised us for our efforts and hard work. This way, he reminded us that students have the ability and just sticking to the new method can change our past belief about writing. We are all learners and should be encouraged as such.

Theme 6: Contextualizing the forms is very fruitful. TBLT, unlike traditional approaches, according to Long (2015), considers both form and meaning in communicative contexts during task implementation. Contextualizing the forms in a meaningful and relevant context helps students to learn writing skill more competently.

[Interview Excerpt 6, March 10, 2020]

The instruction provided activities, in which we could learn the important chunks in relevant contexts. For example, based on the context, I could assess if my meanings are relevant.

Moreover, contextualizing can enhance understanding of writing procedures by using materials, such as objects and realia. It gives real communicative value to the task that learners do; therefore, the learners can recall the situation later and accomplish the real-world activity successfully.

[Interview Excerpt 1, March 10, 2020]

In TBLT classes, the teacher presented the writing procedures with real objects from the outside world. He brought tickets, maps, magazines to the class to provide the real-world examples. So, we were able to associate our writing with the reality happening outside the class.

Discussion

The findings of the current study showed a statistically significant difference between the writing ability of the experimental group when compared to the control group on the post- and delayed post-test. The underlying reason for the findings may be ascribed to the TBLT instruction, assisting the students in the experimental group to gain thematic and systematic knowledge to improve their writing skills.

The study's findings can be explained from this perspective that TBLT might provide communication challenges by making relevant and interesting the introduction and practice of new linguistic structures (Samuda, & Bygate, 2008). In other words, TBLT, by introducing challenging tasks, set the scene for the L2 learners to work with the language to solve the problem (e.g., writing a short paragraph). This involvement with the L2 language, in turn, made L2 learners holistically process form, meaning, and function. According to Bygate et al. (2015), the argument for the superiority of the experimental group over the control group could also be based on the idea that writing tasks may organize language learning and use by establishing the communication context, outlining the goals of the learning activities, and motivating students to use L2 appropriately to complete the tasks. In addition, the results of the present study may gain support from this perspective that in doing the writing tasks, there were processes that drove the attention of L2 learners to aspects of meanings that were quite essential to guide pathways through tasks (Ellis, 2003, 2009). It could generate useful feedback on the students' linguistic gaps "at the precise moment and context where learners need to learn" (p. 201).

The study's findings are partially in line with those of Rahimpour et al. (2011), reporting that structured tasks led to more fluent and complex written performances among EFL learners. The findings also lend support to Willis and Willis's (2007) results reporting that during task implementation, their participants adequately gained the meaning and form of the target linguistic structures. Coupled with the findings of the present study, Nunan (2004) and Hyland (2006) argued that by urging L2 learners to use all language skills concurrently, TBLT could meet the needs and wants of the students to solve real-life problems.

Also, the findings of the classroom observation checklist showed that TBLT can be successfully implemented in Iranian high school classes. That is, through writing activities, TBLT raised students' motivation and self-confidence. Moreover, students were encouraged to use other language skills in a cooperative climate. As a result, writing tasks considered meaning a priority and followed clear objectives of real-world language use. The study's results could be explained from the perspectives of co-constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). In this sense, the students interacted with one another to co-build the required knowledge in a communicative context. With the assistance of their peers, in a social process, the students could fill in the gaps in their writing skills (Moore, 2018; Nunan, 2004).

The results of the focus group interview revealed that the participants had positive attitudes toward TBLT. This could be a result of the focus being more on 'knowing how' than 'knowing that' (Nunan, 2004). That is, TBLT gained support from this philosophy of thought that stresses on procedural knowledge to do a task practically. Likewise, according to Experiential Learning theory (Kolb, 1984), it can be said that the students could incorporate new knowledge and skills to what they already know to write a well-organized paragraph. Moreover, the positive attitudes of the learners toward TBLT can be due to the fact that TBLT was helpful in creating a learning environment that was facilitative for the students' involvement and motivation (Bao & Du, 2015). Additionally, an important reason for the findings may be related to the way TBLT recognized students' cooperation and participation in the learning process and prompted them to use group projects to write in accordance with the stated criteria (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2003).

The remarks of interview participants in this respect are empirically well supported by the results of Leaver and Kaplan (2004), that in comparison with traditional approaches, TBLT was positively welcomed by Czech, Ukrainian, and Russian learners who were learning English in the USA. Furthermore, the study's results agreed with Iwashita and Li's (2012) findings reporting that the use of TBLT led their participants to play an active role in classroom interactions. Plus, their findings documented that the feedback provided during the

interactions made the learners rebuild the non-target structures and incorporated the feedback in the next production.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Despite the robust theoretical foundations, it seems that the communicative approaches, in general, and TBLT, in particular, have not been widely practiced at the Iranian state high schools. This long-lasting gap led the researchers to examine the effects of TBLT on the development of the Iranian high school students' writing ability through qualitative and quantitative approaches. The findings, as reported above, documented a significant improvement in the experimental group's writing ability in comparison with the control group on the immediate post-test and delayed post-test. Moreover, the findings of the observational checklist and the focus group interview suggested that the basic tenets of TBLT were implemented well during the instruction period, and also, that the students had positive attitudes toward TBLT.

Based on the study's findings, a number of pedagogical implications are suggested here. Firstly, pre-service and in-service teacher training courses should be held for the Iranian high school English teachers to get familiar with the basic principles of TBLT how to implement them in their classes. Secondly, the educational policymakers in the Ministry of Education should revise the high school English textbooks to be in tune with the fundamentals of TBLT. Most notably, the writing part of the coursebooks could be designed in line with a process-based approach to writing. In this way, it can be assured that the high school students would be equipped with the needed thematic and systematic knowledge to plan, draft, and edit a well-organized paragraph. Finally, given that the writing performance the participants presented with the aspects of content, language, organization, and achievement of task requirements, the student's attention could be drawn to the efficiency of TBLT as it is implemented in a cooperative climate.

A number of recommendations for additional research are provided in light of the restrictions placed on the current study here. The present study, as noted above, investigated the effects of TBLT on the Iranian high school students' writing skills. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the efficiency of TBLT, further mixed methods research is needed to discover its effects on other language skills (e.g., reading, speaking, and listening). Though the study's findings illustrated the effectiveness TBLT in the students' writing performance, future research could delve into its effects across other contexts, such as private language schools and universities. As this study included only female students, more studies are required to investigate the effects of TBLT on the improvement of male students' writing ability with different ages (e.g., kids and adults). In addition, further mixed methods studies could examine the impact of TBLT on the development of intercultural competence, interlanguage pragmatic competence, and discourse competence.

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Appendix 1

Rubric Writing to Measure the Students' Writing Skills
Adopted from Nunan (2004)

1. Content. It needs to be relevant and sufficient. Relevant means the content is meaningful to the topic, and sufficient means that there is enough content (i.e., not too little and not too much).
2. Organization. It means that content/ideas should be presented logically and grouped together or separated in meaningful ways.
3. Language. It means that students need to make use of a range of grammatical and sentence structures accurately, to use a variety of vocabulary and expressions accurately, to use their punctuation correctly, and to use their spellings accurately.
4. Task Requirement. It means that students need to follow the task requirements. For example, a task requirement may limit the students' writings to100 words.

	Items	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Session 7	Session 8	Session 9	Session 10	Session 11	Session 12	Total
1	The instruction is highly motivating and promotes student confidence.	3	5	4	3	5	4	2	5	3	4	4	3	48
2	The writing activities provide opportunities for real-world language use.	4	5	4	3	4	5	1	4	5	3	4	5	47
3	The students make use of other skills to accomplish a writing task.	5	5	4	5	4	5	2	4	5	4	3	4	50
4	In the writing tasks, the primary focus in on meaning.	4	4	3	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	51
5	In the writing tasks, there is some kind of 'gap' that encourages the students to write about it and express their own opinions about it.	4	5	5	3	4	5	2	4	4	5	5	3	49
6	The class runs in a student-centered way and students practice writing in groups in a cooperative climate.	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	52
7	In the writing activities, the focus on form is contextualized.	3	3	4	5	4	5	4	3	4	5	4	5	50
8	Feedback is provided through self-correct and other students.	4	5	5	4	3	4	5	3	4	2	4	4	47
9	The writing tasks are goal/outcome-oriented.	4	5	5	2	4	5	4	5	3	4	4	4	48
10	The students report their performance, targeting the linguistic form.	3	3	4	4	5	5	3	4	4	5	5	4	49

Table: Classroom observation checklist