FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION AND EFL LEARNERS’ WRITING PERFORMANCE: THE CASE OF COLLABORATIVE OUTPUT TASK OF DICTOGLOSS

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ABSTRACT
Focus-on-Form (FoF) instruction have become one of the most talked-about topics in the field of language teaching and learning when scholars found that when second language learning is entirely based on meaningful input and interaction, some linguistic forms cannot nurture. One of the most well-known FoF activities on which the present study focused is output-oriented task of dictogloss. Among the substantial body of research investigating the effect of dictogloss on language learning, little attention has been given to the effect of collaborative dictogloss task on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners’ writing skill. This study is an attempt to consider the effect of collaborative output task of dictogloss on EFL learners’ writing skill. Forty pre-intermediate EFL learners in Sama institute in Iran participated in current study and they were randomly assigned to two groups (control and experimental). A composition writing test was used to measure participants’ writing performance and TEIQUE questionnaire implemented to examine their initial emotional intelligence. Then, the experimental group applied collaborative dictogloss task which focused on form and meaning of the text, while control group was taught under the conventional approaches which did not put any emphasis on the collaborative dictogloss. Although the finding of present study did not support previous studies reporting the effectiveness of dictogloss task in different aspects of writing skill, it revealed the fact that collaborative output task of dictogloss did not have any significant effect on learners’ writing performance.

KEYWORDS: FoF Instruction, Collaborative Dictogloss Task, Writing Performance
INTRODUCTION

Developing writing ability, as a communicative skill, has been considered as a difficult task since a large number of students make a lot of mistakes and errors in their written texts and cannot create a coherent text. This inability in writing skill may have different reasons. One of them seems to be due to teaching instruction and error correction. Largely, the concerns of EFL teachers in Iranian institutes is the written products of students while the process of how to construct and formulate is not paid much attention, that is they mostly apply product approach of writing in classrooms and encourage the students to write down on the proposed topic individually. According to Elley, Barham, Lamb and Wyllie (1976) if teaching instruction is based on traditional approach, the learners will lose their motivation, and see writing classes as a difficult and boring one. To solve this problem, teachers need to take a different view towards writing instruction and can employ collaborative tasks which are originally supported by the social constructivist view of Vygotsky (1978).

In this regard, Juwita and Aryuliva (2013) found that collaborative output tasks can be applied for promoting learners’ motivation, the accuracy in the production of language and activation of learners’ prior knowledge in the classroom. Further advantages of collaborative task may be related to motivation which positively influences learning. Previous studies indicate that the learners in collaborative tasks would show higher motivation than those in whole-class doing the task individually (Liao, 2006; Pishghadam & Ghadiri, 2011). Extensive studies in second language learning support the use of tasks which need learners to produce output collaboratively (Mayo, 2002). Lesser (2004), for example, believed that learners generally perform better while working together rather than working alone.

According to Nassaji “using collaborative tasks requiring learners to get involved in deliberate and cooperative comprehension and production of language, e. g. the use of dictogloss can be (regarded as a means of integrating) (FoF) and communication by process” (as cited in Abbasian & Mohammadi, 2013, p. 1371). Dictogloss task involves the students in collaborative reconstruction of written texts and make them, in either tasks, equally focus on form as they collaboratively construct the texts (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). Moreover, they suggested that the dictogloss led the students to notice and reconstruct complex syntactic structures. Lee (2001) focused on the collaboration feature of the dictogloss task and proposed that a collaborative output task of dictogloss help learners be more pleased, have good feelings when they are working collaboratively and consequently learn to use language effectively. Therefore, there seems to be a good reason to use collaborative dictogloss as an appropriate activity to improve learners’ writing performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Focus on Form Instruction

Recent developments in the field of second language learning have brought about changes in pedagogical approaches in second language instruction. Over the past few decades, after the introduction of communicative approach (CA), the focus of classroom instruction has shifted from an emphasis on knowledge of rules and grammar to communicative ability in real-life
encounters and use of language within communicative contexts. While some researchers in communicative approach put emphasis on communication and fluency and claim that when learners are exposed to comprehensible input in real life communication, second language acquisition takes place automatically (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), others state that it is necessary to have particular attention to form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Long, 1991; Norris & Ortega, 2000). They believe that when second language learning is completely based on experiential and meaning-centered instruction in classrooms, some linguistic competence levels of second language cannot develop as well. Meaningful input and opportunities for interaction allow learner to achieve fluency but not necessarily accuracy in the target language (Ellis, 2000; Long, 1991; Williams, 1999). Seemingly, there is a need to make a balance between the traditional approach which entirely focuses on forms and the communicative approach which put emphasis on meaningful communication in real context (Park, 2004, Long & Robinson, 1998) and consequently focus on form instruction was adopted as a new approach which primarily focused on noticing forms in communicative context.

Long (1991) presented Focus-on-form instruction (FoF) for the first time as an attempt to “overtly draw students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (pp. 45-46). FoF instruction can be effective in improving learners’ interlanguage grammar and linguistic accuracy (Ellis, 2001). According to Nassaji “using collaborative tasks requiring learners to get involved in deliberate and cooperative comprehension and production of language, e. g. through the use of dictogloss can be a way of integrating (FoF) and communication by process” (as cited in Abbasian & Mohammadi, 2013, p. 1371). Dictogloss task can be used both individually and collaboratively which get involved the students in collaborative reconstruction of written texts and students in either tasks focused equally on form as they collaboratively constructed the texts (Lapkin & Swain, 2001). Moreover, they suggested that the dictogloss led the students to notice and reproduce complex syntactic structures.

Collaborative Dictogloss Task
Among the considerable number of studies on focus on form instruction, perhaps the most interesting ones are those that in light of Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning and output hypothesis, have taken into account the value of meaningful social interaction in language learning process (Swain, 1998, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Based on the sociocultural theory on the role of collaboration in language learning and psychological area, the present study used dictogloss as a type of focus on form collaborative task for developing learners’ writing. Dictogloss is an integrated skill and collaborative activity was originally assisted the learners to improve their grammar knowledge and was first proposed by Wajnyrb in 1990 which suggested a major change from traditional dictation (Jacobs & Small, 2003). According to Wajnyrb, while involved in the task of dictoglass ”students individually try to write down as much as they can, and subsequently work in small-groups to reconstruct the text; that is, the goal is not the goal to reproduce the original, but to ‘gloss’ it using their combined linguistic resources” (p. 12).

Dictogloss has two very important features. One is the use of all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in order to do a dictogloss activity completely. In the dictation
stage, learners listen to their teacher read a text. In the reconstruction stage, they speak to their group mates in the target language, and write a reconstructed version of the text. In the analysis and correction stage, they must read the original text. Another important feature is providing learners with opportunity to reflect on their use of the target language. In order to do a dictogloss task, learners must rewrite the contents of the original text. In the reconstruction, they talk about the language of the text they are reconstructing (Mayo, 2002).

According to Swain (1998) reconstruction of a text collaboratively, may push students beyond their current interlanguage to more native like forms. Learners not only acquire new knowledge but reinforce what they already know. This activity helps them to have a more active role in the class and facilitates the class management (as cited in Todeva, 1998). Dictogloss has been the subject of a number of studies that supported the use of the task (Brown, 2001; Kooshafar, Youhanaee & Amirian, 2012; Kowal & Swain, 1994; Nabei, 1996; Storch, 1998, Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Kuiken and Vedder (2002a), for instance, investigated the effect of interaction between ESL learners through dictogloss task on the acquisition of the passive form. The qualitative analysis showed that interaction stimulated noticing to construct the new linguistic structures. The findings of a bunch of other studies indicated that in dictogloss activity, reconstructing the texts in groups enables the students to solve linguistic problems that lied beyond their individual abilities (Donato, 1994; Kim, 2008; Kuiken & Vedder, 2002a; Storch, 2002; Swain, 1998; Swain, 2000; Swain, 2006; Swain, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2001, 2002).

Pishghadam and Ghadiri’s (2011) investigation focused the effect of form versus meaning-focused tasks on the development of collocations among Iranian Intermediate EFL learners. The results revealed the fact that FFI group (dictogloss task) had a significantly better performance on the collocation test. In a more recent study Kooshafar et al. (2012) focused on the use of cohesive devices to create a coherent text through dictogloss technique. Two techniques of dictogloss and explicit teaching were used to examine which group was more successful in using correct conjunction in their writing composition test. The results of the study pointed to the conclusion that dictogloss technique seems to be more effective. Jabarpour and Tajeddin (2013) also compared the effects of three FoF tasks of input enhancement, individual output and collaborative output on the acquisition of English subjunctive mood. The study indicated that the influence of both input and collaborative output activities were greater than the individual output task and also emphasized the importance of using collaborative activities and interaction in the process of English structure acquisition.

While these studies, among many others, have provided us with valuable insights into the effect of dictogloss on different skills, there are a small number of studies on its impact on learners’ writing skill. Abbasian and Mohammadi (2013), for example, examined the effect of dictogloss on intermediate level students’ writing skill based on content, organization, vocabulary, language usage and mechanics and found that dictogloss technique improved learners’ organization and mechanics whereas content, usage and vocabulary didn’t improved significantly. Since writing seems to be a major problem of many EFL learners in Iran, especially those at the higher levels of learning incapable of organizing their ideas in texts to create a meaningful writing, it seems that more research is needed in this field to encourage using such collaborative task during the
language teaching course in English classrooms in lower level e.g. pre-intermediate. Collaborative dictogloss may nurture and develop students’ competence in writing through group works and take an active role in their own learning. Since it is apparent from the literature on FoF that there is a paucity of research in the Iranian educational context in writing ability in general, present study is aimed at finding the effect of collaborative output task of dictogloss on Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill.

RESEARCH QUESTION
Based on what discussed above, the problem which is going to be examined in present study is to see if collaborative dictogloss is effective in learners’ writing performance. In line with this problem this question will be answered:
1. Does collaborative output task of dictogloss have any effect on EFL learners’ writing skill?

METHODOLOGY
Participants
A total of 40 male and female students in Sama language institute (SLA) in Iran, participated in this study. The students were Persian native speakers and had taken English for three to four years. There were two intermediate classes, one taken as the experimental group with 20 students and the other the control group with 20 students and they varied in age from 13 to 16 years. Students at advanced levels were not included because they were informative on meaning and structure of the words to write a text coherently. Students at lower levels were excluded as well, since they have difficulty in using correct structures and vocabulary. (Kooshafar et al., 2012).

Instruments
To reveal the effect of collaborative dictogloss task on writing performance, the following instrumentations were used:

Dictogloss texts
The texts were taken from Anecdotes in American English book by Hill (1980). According to Read (2006) the selected texts were short and simple because students had to keep the texts in their short term memory to remember them during the process of reconstructing. Furthermore, in preparing the texts, great care was taken to choose all texts appropriate for pre-intermediate level students in terms of their level of difficulty and the vocabulary. To this aim, two experienced teachers were asked to check all the texts whether students would know the meanings of most of the words in the texts at this level. The researcher first picked a 162-word text for the training session. However, when reading the text for the first time during the training session, the participants expressed that it was long. For the second reading, the text was reduced to approximately 120 words.

Composition Writing Test
Learners wrote composition writings prior and after the experiment. The pretest and the posttest of writing had exactly the same format but different content. The reason for having different
content in the pretest and posttest was to eliminate the retention effect that the pretest may have on the subjects’ performance on the posttest. The time allotted to students to write the text was 30 minutes.

**Writing Scoring Criteria**

To analyze key aspects of writing, the Jacobs’ ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel & Hughey, 1981) was employed. The checklist focuses on the five broad categories: mechanics (spelling, punctuation, etc.), language use (grammar), content, organization, and vocabulary. The response scales range from excellent to poor. The validity of scale is accepted through a wide large number of raters and composition researchers. All the writing sheets were marked by two teachers and if the given scores of the two raters were not the same, the mean of the two scores were calculated as the final score.

**Procedure**

First the writing composition pretest was administered to all subjects one week prior to the treatment and before the dictogloss training session. The participants in two groups were required to write a composition pretest within 30 minutes. Then collaborative dictogloss was used in experimental group. The treatment contains four major steps:

Preparation/warm-up: Learners were randomly divided into 3-member groups by the teacher before the dictogloss task began. All the students were given small pieces of paper to individually write down bits of information. Each group was given a single sheet of paper on which one of the members of the group would write the final version of the reconstructed passage. Students then were prepared for the dictogloss activity by introducing them to the topic of the dictogloss text. Any unfamiliar vocabulary items in the text would be explained at this stage.

Reading the text: The short text was read twice at natural speed to the students by teacher. The first time students just listened to become orientated to the topic, and while in second time they were expected to note some key words which they needed to reconstruct the original text.

Reconstruction: The small-groups worked together, pooling their notes to reconstruct the story they had heard and teacher monitored their interaction to make sure that every student was contributing. Students were supposed to pay more attention on structures and meaning. One member of each group wrote out the text. The time given for students to reconstruct the text was around ten minutes.

Analysis and correction: Finally, the texts were compared to the original text, analyzed and corrected by all the students with their teacher’s assistance. The teacher would randomly ask a student from each group to read what they wrote and the rest of the class listened and expressed their opinion on whether the reconstructed sentences were semantically and syntactically similar to the original text. During the correction, the teacher asked them to correct the text. When the students were not able to offer correct answers and explanations, the teacher explained the mistakes. This process went on until all the sentences were accepted by the students and teacher. The modified sentences were put on the board and the students were asked to edit their own text.
In control group, the teacher introduced the topic and asked them to write about a topic. Teacher then checked the participants’ writing and corrected them. Finally the posttests were administered to both groups of students in Week 10. The students were not informed when the posttest would be given. The posttest given to all the groups was exactly the same and it had exactly the same format as the pretest. They were supposed to write an essay with the intention of examining how collaborative dictogloss may effect on their writing performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
To check the reliability of the writing scale, the internal consistency reliability of writing was checked by calculating Cronbach’s alpha coefficient and it was found that the reliability of writing pre-test was and post-test was 0.80.

**Inter-rater Reliability**
Due to the fact that “rating on writing test in academic context vary considerably” (Hamp-Lyons, 2003, p. 174) inter-rater correlation coefficient was calculated for both group of pretest and posttests. The results as indicated in Table 5.1, revealed a high positive correlation between the rating of raters in both pre- and posttests, so there is no significant difference between the scores of the two teachers.

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<th>Table 1: Inter-rater Correlation of Raters</th>
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*Note. A = Rater A; B = Rater B; E = Experimental group; C = Control group*

**Testing the research Question**
The research question was to examine whether collaborative task of dictogloss on learners’ writing performance. The descriptive statistics for the writing pre-test and post-test in both experimental and control groups are detailed in Table 2. Based on the following table, the mean scores for the writing skill in experimental and control groups, respectively, are 75.35 and 76.73 as well as post-test scores of experimental and control groups, respectively, are 79.43 and 77.53.
A comparison of the means of pre and posttest of experimental and control groups demonstrated a gain score of 4.07 (79.42 - 75.35) for experimental and a gain score of 0.8 (77.52 - 76.72) for the control group. Therefore, the initial look at the mean differences of experimental and control groups indicates that the experimental group outperformed the control group.

In the next step, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether any significant difference might be observed for the writing pre-test of both groups. The results of the independent t-test, as presented in Table 3, indicate that there is not any significant difference between experimental and control groups’ scores on the writing pretest (t (38) = .38, P= .70> .05). This means any changes in the mean scores of the groups in the posttest were unlikely to be attributed to preexisting differences among the groups and, instead, could be due to the different treatments they received.

The results of the independent t-test, as depicted in Table 3, indicate that there is not any significant difference between experimental and control groups’ mean scores on the writing posttest (t (33) = -.54, P = .60> .05). As observed in figure 1, the pre-test average of writing skill for experimental group is more than control group.
Discussion
The purpose of present study was to examine the effect of collaborative output task of dictogloss on learners’ writing performance. The research question asked whether the collaborative output dictogloss task had an effect on EFL learners’ writing skill. To test the research question the data was calculated by descriptive statistics and independent t-tests for pre and posttests. An initial look at the descriptive statistics, revealed that the mean of writing in posttest was higher than the pretest in experimental group. However, the results of the analysis showed that there is no difference between writing pretest and posttest scores. Thus, it can be concluded that collaborative dictogloss did not have any significant effect on pre-intermediate learners’ writing skill. This finding is consistent with the finding of Kuiken and Vedder (2002a) who found that dictogloss did not significantly improve students’ performance. However, the findings do not support some FoF research studies that have reported better performance in producing forms correctly during dictogloss task (Lapkin & Swain, 1998; Lim & Jacobs, 2001a). Moreover, it is inconsistent with Jacobs and Small (2003) and Abbasian and Mohammadi (2013) who reported the positive effect of dictogloss on writing performance. However, more research is needed to examine the application of collaborative dictogloss task in an EFL context.

The reasons for this finding could include some unsystematic errors which were unobservable in some students such as tiredness and reluctance. Moreover, it may be difficult for pre-intermediate students to focus on both form and the meaningfulness of the text. This explanation is supported by Van Patten claim that lower-level students find it difficult to focus on meaning and form immediately (as cited in Tragant & Munoz, 2004). The results, on the other hand, are in line with Khatib and Derakhshan’s (2011) study. They asserted many EFL teachers are not proficient enough to elaborate and explained the difficulties for the students. Thus, another evidence for such result is that the teacher might not be enough proficient enough to correct and analyze the problematic area for the students. Additionally, the limitation of the time may affect the written production of the students. If the study time had been longer, the results might have been different. The last reason seems to be due to the class size which may not big enough to enable teachers to address students’ problem areas both verbally and nonverbally.
The result of present study is in harmony with Kuken and Vadder’s (2002b) study which did not prove the effectiveness of dictogloss on their learners L2 progress. However, it is in contrast with output hypothesis and Vygotsky’s theory. Output hypothesis, provided the theoretical underpinning on FoF instruction, and suggests that when learners are pushed to produce output, their language proficiency can be improved by engaging them produce language through metatalk and interaction. In this regard, Swain (1998) and Lapkin and Swain (2000) claimed that involvement in collaborative activities may promote the learners’ accurate production of the target forms (as cited in Nemati & Arabmofrad, 2014). According Vygotsky’s theory learners may achieve a higher level of language competence and reconstruct their knowledge through collaborative work and corrective feedback and interaction (Esteve & Cañada, 2001).

CONCLUSION
The result of this study seems to not support previous studies that have declared dictogloss task as an effective instruction in improving language skills and especially in writing achievement. It seems that more studies are needed to examine the application of collaborative dictogloss task in an EFL context. Moreover, due to some limitations further investigation warrant in future research studies. The number of the participants in this study was limited, so maybe the findings cannot be generalized for all the EFL students in Iran. Besides, the limitation of time of the study may have affected the written production of the pre-intermediate students. If the interval period had been longer, collaborative dictogloss task might have improved learners’ writing performance. It is also advisable to replicate this study for students at higher levels of language proficiency, since it may be difficult for pre-intermediate level students to focus on form and meaning simultaneously.

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