The Efficacy of an SFL-Oriented Register Instruction in Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Performance and Perception: Language Proficiency in Focus

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Abstract

The current study sought to explore the impact of SFL-oriented register instruction on Iranian EFL learner' writing performance with a central focus on their English proficiency level. As its secondary aim, the study delved deeply into the learners' perception of the register-based instruction. To these ends, 50 intermediate and 50 advanced Iranian EFL learners were selected randomly and assigned to four groups: two experimental and two control groups. Employing an experimental pretest/posttest design, the learners of the two experimental groups received instruction on the three components of register; that is, field, tenor, and mode along with the implementation of a three-phase teaching/learning cycle, whereas the learners in the control groups were exposed to a conventional writing instruction. Quantitative analysis of the learners' writing performance on the pre- and posttest measures revealed the contributory role of register instruction in improving Iranian EFL learners' writing performance, regardless of their English

proficiency level. Furthermore, having been surveyed through a researcher-made questionnaire, the advanced and intermediate learners expressed their positive attitude towards the instruction. The findings highlighted the necessity of superseding the traditional linguistic-based writing instruction by a contextual and situational teaching methodology similar to what has been implemented in the current study.

Keywords: SFL, register, teaching/learning cycle, writing performance, EFL learners

Introduction

As evidenced by a whole bunch of research on language learning (e.g., Harmer, 2007; Hayes & Flower, 1980; Lee, 2013; Nunan, 1989; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Salma, 2015; Tribble, 1997), writing is the most daunting challenge faced by learners in their first-hand experience of language learning. When it comes to writing in a foreign language, the difficulty learners encounter will be increased owing to various hindrances to foreign language learning such as inadequate exposure to language input (Lee, 2003), sociological barriers such as self-avoidance or anxiety about making mistakes (Dorniye, 2005), interlingual transfer (Gomma,2010), lack of in-depth knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Huy, 2015), multiplicity of approaches to teaching writing (Raimes, 1994), overemphasis upon accuracy (Hedge, 2005), and inappropriate use of learning strategies (Beare, 2000). A plentitude of studies, therefore, have been launched to explore how to lighten the burden of writing in a foreign language delving into the most effective approaches to teaching writing in EFL contexts (e.g., Hasan & Akhand, 2010; VanderPyl, 2012; Setyono, 2014; Corneille, 2017; Liaghat & Biria, 2018).

A chronological review of the methodology developed to teach writing in EFL contexts testifies to a gradual shift from a form-oriented instruction, which emphasizes accurate use of language (Silva, 1990), and meaning-oriented teaching methodology, which promotes appropriate use of language (Loewen, 2004), to a type of instruction which strikes a balance between form and meaning. Such an insight into language learning in general and writing in particular justifies superseding the product-based approach −with a central focus on sentence structure and grammar (Brown, 2000)− as well as the process approach −which mainly centered around various processes involved in writing (Nunan, 1991)− by the genre-based approach to teaching writing. Having achieved such a breakthrough in the 1990s, teaching and learning grammar and syntax were accompanied by a clear instruction on the specific purposes, structures, linguistic characteristics, and rhetorical patterns pertaining to the specific genre of a writing task (Hyland, 2007).

In general, a genre-based pedagogy is basically inspired by one of the three broad schools of thoughts, namely New Rhetoric (NR), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Lee,

2013). SFL, which is a functionalist school of linguistics, is developed by Halliday (1978) who gave credence to the notion that language facilitates communication between members of a particular discourse community employing a system of meaning-making choices (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004). According to Steiner (1997), SFL theory "views its language model to be organized around systems of choices, rather than a hierarchy of structures" (p. 17). This theory addresses the functional aspects of language referring to three different metafunctions, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings (Figueiredo, 2010). As stated by Leckie-Tarry (1993), the proponents of the SFL theory "are not just interested in what language is, but why language is; not just what language means, but how language means" (p. 26).

In an SFL perspective on language pedagogy, context (i.e., the environment in which language is used) is of vital importance (Halliday, 1978; Martin, 2001).Having acknowledged that a full-scaled investigation of SFL entails taking account of both syntax and discourse analysis, Halliday (1994) claimed that SFL studies generally address the appropriateness of a text's grammatical and lexical construct to its linguistic and cultural context. To discover the prominent role of context in an SFL-oriented language pedagogy, the following statements of Halliday (1978) can be taken into consideration:

> If the context is theorized in linguistic terms as another stratum in the organization of language itself, this enables us to model its variation and complexity, taking account of the differing situational contexts for different levels and kinds of teaching/learning activities, as well as the processes and the institutions of education and the different cultures within which they are located. (p. 1)

The definition provided in SFL for the term 'context' is twofold: the context of culture −referred to as 'genre'− and the context of situation − referred to as 'register'. The term register was initially proposed by Malinowski (1923, as cited in Christi, 2004) to refer to the situational context in which an utterance happens. Having validated the significance of register to refer to the context of situation, Firth (1950) conceptualized register as the linguistically-specific environment in which a piece of verbal

or written language occurs. A couple of decades later, Vandamme (1977, as cited in Vandamme & Lowenthal, 1986) added some nonverbal denotations to the definition of register proposing an action-type model of register description which attributed a particular network of probable actions and utterances to a specific situation. Believing that the Vandamme' (1977) model of register is deficient in addressing the distinctive linguistic features of different register types, Couture (1986) defined register as a concept which "imposes constraints at the linguistic levels of vocabulary and syntax" (p. 86). In a more recent definition, Gee and Handford (2012) defined register as different situation-based variables such as linguistic structures and systematic patterns which accounted for the variety of texts in a specific genre.

The first classification of register was proposed by Firth (1950) who determined three contributory factors in realization of the context of situation including subjects participating in a text or an event, objects related to the text or event, and the results of verbal action. Having made some revisions to the Firth' (1950) classification, Halliday (1985) asserted that a particular text's register aimed at addressing three variables; namely field (the subject that communication is centered around), tenor (the people taking part in communication) and mode (the channel of meaning conveyance). According to Martin (2001), what casts light onto the ways in which the three functionally defined domains of register (i.e., field, tenor, and mode) may be combined in a certain society is the context of culture (genre). By virtue of this claim, Martin (2001) corroborated the view offered by the pioneers of SFL who believed genre underlies register. His claim, however, contradicted Couture's (1986) statement that "register and genre are concepts operating at the same level" (p. 86).

As far as EFL is concerned, a wide-ranging review of the literature testifies to the abundance of research on the contributory role of various approaches to writing instruction in writing development. Being dominated by the fundamental tenets underlying three major approaches to teaching writing; namely product-based, process-based, and genre-based approach, the investigation into an effective writing instruction is deemed to still be continued. The study on the practicality of infusing the SFL theory into writing classrooms is one of the latest endeavor to develop a more elaborate

writing instruction which has garnered substantial attention from English language teaching (ELT) scholars and educators (e.g., Assadi Aidinlou, 2011; Chiang, 2013; Colombi, 2002; Byrnes, 2009; Mosayebnezhad & Assadi Aidinlou, 2015; Schulze, 2011). Having generally centered on either writing achievement or design features (i.e., instructional tasks, teaching methods, and curriculum designs), a large majority of these studies validated the usefulness of using an SFL-oriented writing instruction in improving L2 learners' writing competence. Nonetheless, no adequate learner-focused endeavor, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has been devoted to exploration of the possibility of improving Iranian EFL learners' writing performance tapping into the SFL theory and taking full advantage of a register-based writing instruction.

Giving prominence to the components of register; namely, field, tenor, and mode, the present study sought to bridge the gap in the literature, aiming to explore the efficacy of an SFL-oriented register instructing on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance, with a central focus on English proficiency. The study also aimed to explore whether or not Iranian EFL students have a favorable opinion about receiving SFL-oriented register instruction in writing classroom. To accomplish the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Does SFL-oriented register instruction have any differential effect on Iranian advanced and intermediate EFL learners' writing performance?
2. How do the participants perceive the SFL-oriented register instruction?

Method

Participants

Employing stratified random sampling, 50 intermediate and 50 advanced Iranian EFL learners were recruited to participate in the instructional phase of the current research. The participant sample comprised both male and female (41 male and 59 male) learners who aged between 24 and 35. A paper-based sample test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL PBT) guaranteed the authenticity of the participants' placement in terms of English proficiency level. Having been selected to take part in the instructional phase of the current research, the learners at each English

proficiency level were grouped into experimental and control conditions, each containing 25 learners. The results drawn from the TOEFL PBT sample test validated the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups in terms of English proficiency level as well.

Instruments and Materials

TOEFL PBT Sample Test. To grantee the homogeneity of the study groups in terms of English proficiency, a PBT TOEFL sample test was selected from the book *Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test* by Deborah Philips. The test, with a time limit of 115 minutes and a maximum possible score of 140 (one mark for each correct answer and no mark for incorrect one), measured the learners' proficiency in English in terms of three sub-skills including listening comprehension (50 items), reading comprehension (50 items), and structure and written expression (40 items). The validity and reliability of the test are self-evident.

TOFEL iBT Sample Test of Written English. To gauge any potential change in the participants' writing ability as a result of the study course, two TOEFL iBT sample tests of written English (independent tasks), extracted from the actual TOEFL corpus, were administered to the whole participant sample, one before (the pretest) and one after (the posttest) the instruction. To accomplish each task, the participants were asked to write an essay on a given topic in 30 minutes. The actual scoring method adopted by ETS was followed to measure the learners' performance on both the pre- and posttest measures, using a score scale of 0 to 5. The validity and reliability of the tests are self-evident taking the vast body of research carried out to investigate the reliability and comparability of TOEFL iBT scores into account (see *TOEFL iBT Research Insight*, published by ETS).

Questionnaire. To evaluate the learners' perception of the register-based writing instruction, a researcher-made questionnaire was administered to the learners of the experimental groups, at the conclusion of the treatment. Being comprised of 20 items, the questionnaire delved into the learners' stand on the instruction employing a 5-point Liker scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' (5) to 'Strongly Disagree (1). The questionnaire was intended to gather detailed information about the learners' overall

satisfaction with the course (5 items), perception of their writing achievement and affective outcomes (8 items), and attitude towards specific elements of the course (7 items). To illuminate the possibility of response bias, three reverse worded items (items #3, 11, and 17) were inserted into the questionnaire. Once developed by the researcher, the questionnaire was submitted to two experts in TEFL in order to establish validity. The data elicited from a pilot study on 10 intermediate and 10 advanced Iranian EFL learners were used to determine the questionnaire's reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha scale estimated for the whole questionnaire (0.752) confirmed the appropriateness of the instrument for the specific context of the study.

Instructional Materials. A total of 20 model essays, selected from the book *How to Prepare for TOEFL Essay, 2nd Edition,* by Lin Lougheed, constituted the core subjects of the study course. Acting as exemplars of expository writing, the texts facilitated the scrutiny of different elements of register during the 20 training sessions of the study course.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The specific register-based instruction of the study was based on Halliday's (1985) SFL theory which proposes the necessity of generating a genre-specific language production focusing on three major components of register (i.e., field, tenor, and mood). Additionally, the three-phase teaching/learning cycle introduced by Martin (2009) laid the groundwork for the writing instruction. According to this cycle, the training phase included three stages: deconstruction of a model text, joint construction of a similar text, and independent construction of a new text.

Procedure

The current quantitative study deployed a quasi-experimental pretest/posttest design to investigate the relative effectiveness of an SFL-oriented register instruction (i.e., the independent variable) on advanced and intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing performance and perception (i.e., the dependent variables). The instructional phase of the study included a total of 22 (two testing and 20 training) sessions, each of 90-minutes' duration. Having been pretested on writing at the beginning of the treatment,

the learners in the intermediate and advanced experimental groups received a specific register-based writing instruction. To do so, they initially received a clear and detailed lecture on the concept of register and its major elements (i.e., field, tenor, and mode).They were also taught how to do register analysis receiving several examples illustrating how a particular situational characteristic may correspond to various linguistic features in an expository writing, as the specific genre of the study.

During each of the training sessions, the learners were required to generate an expository essay about a given topic going through a three-phase writing instruction. In the first phase, the learners were invited to deconstruct a model essay on the topic, exploiting the scaffolding provided by the instructor. After a meticulous reading of the model text, they were asked to scrutinize how different linguistic features symbolized the three register-based elements (i.e., field, tenor, and mode).

The model texts were initially analyzed in terms of 'field' evaluating the correspondence between linguistic features (e.g., nouns, verbs, and adverbs) and the sub-components of field including processes, participants, and circumstances. Going through this stage, the learners were supposed to achieve an acceptable realization of the content and theme that the text centered on. In the second stage, the learners dealt with 'tenor, being invited to focus on the linguistic features used in the model text to construct relationships between interlocutors. Different choices of clause types (mood), linguistic means used by the writer to express varying degrees of probability and obligation (modality), and linguistic features that the writer used to express his/her evaluation of different stances on actions (appraisal value) were also discussed in the tenor analysis phase. The concluding analytical phase was intended to raise the learners' awareness of the textual organization chosen by the writer to make contextually-specific meanings introducing a number of elements such as theme, rhyme, repetition, conjunction, and pronoun.

Having thoroughly analyzed the model essays, the learners embarked upon joint construction of a similar text in small groups of peers (containing 5 learners) and under the instructor's expert guidance. To construct the text,

therefore, the learners relied upon the register-based knowledge of the topic, the schematic structure and linguistic features discussed in groups, and the scaffolding provided as a result of learner-instructor interaction. Having ensured that the learners acquired a basic knowledge of the text's register, every single learner was asked to write his/her own text independently. The instructor's role at this stage was confined to facilitating the process of writing when the need arose.

In the control condition of the study, the intermediate and advanced leaners were exposed to a conventional writing instruction being involved in a variety of pre-writing and writing activities. As a typical method to activate the learners' background knowledge, the control groups' learners were provided with model essays in much the same way as done in the experimental groups; however, the texts were analyzed by the instructor focusing only on grammatical structures and vocabulary used by the writer to convey the intended meaning. Having analyzed the model essays. After a brief analysis of the model essays, the learners embarked on writing, being provided with the instructor's scaffolding as the need arose.

To measure the learners' writing gains as a result of the study course, the final session was devoted to the administration of the posttest measure. To wipe out objectivity in scoring, the learners' writing performance on both the pre- and posttest measures was evaluated by two raters. The strong correlation between the two sets of scores ($r = .716$, $p < .01$) indicated an acceptable degree of inter-rater agreement. Finally, the experimental groups' learners were asked to fill in the questionnaire reflecting on their perception of the register-based instruction.

Results
Addressing the First and Second Research Questions
Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the pretest and posttest writing scores obtained by the learners in different groups of the study.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Pre- and Posttest Writing Scores in Different Groups of the Study

Group	PL	Variable	*N*	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis
Experimental	Advanced	Pretest Scores	25	3	5	3.52	.653	.895	-.152
		Posttest Scores	25	3	5	4.08	.640	-.065	-.313
	Intermediate	Pretest Scores	25	1	3	2.48	.586	-.592	-.540
		Posttest Scores	25	2	3	3.04	.539	.047	.981
Control	Advanced	Pretest Scores	25	2	4	3.24	.523	.295	-.008
		Posttest Scores	25	3	5	3.40	.577	1.130	.439
	Intermediate	Pretest Scores	25	1	3	2.36	.638	-.473	-.538
		Posttest Scores	25	2	3	2.64	.490	-.621	-1.762

Note: PL: Proficiency Level, Min=Minimum, Max=Maximum, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

As depicted in Table 1, notwithstanding the remarkable similarity between the two intermediate groups in terms of initial writing ability (Experimental: *M* = 2.48, *SD* = .586; Control: *M* = 2.36, *SD* = .638), the learners' of the advanced experimental group (*M* = 3.52, *SD* = .653) outperformed their counterparts in the control group (*M* = 3.24, *SD* = .523) on the pretest measure. This pre-existing difference between the two advanced groups in terms of prior writing ability implied the necessity of regarding the writing pretest scores as the covariate variable of the study.

Having received the specific treatment of the study, the learners in both experimental groups (Advanced: *M* = 4.08, *SD* = .640; Intermediate: *M* = 3.04, *SD* = .539) outperformed their counterparts in the control groups (Advanced: *M* = 3.40, *SD* = .577; Intermediate: *M* = 2.64, *SD* =. 490). The pairwise comparison of the groups' pre- and posttest mean scores revealed that all the groups improved in terms of writing performance at the conclusion of the study course; however, the greatest amount of improvement belonged to the two experimental groups.

A two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the impact of the register-based and conventional writing instruction on the participants' writing posttest performances. Additionally, the two-way ANCOVA examined whether the participants' achievements, as a result of the specific instruction of the study, was dependent upon their English proficiency level. Before performing the main analysis, the preliminary analyses were carried out to ensure no violation of the assumptions underlying a two-way ANCOVA. Results drawn from the two-way ANCOVA on the posttest writing scores are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of the Two-way ANCOVA on the Posttest Writing Scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	PartialEta Squared
Corrected Model	42.346	4	10.586	61.911	.000	.723
Intercept	8.125	1	8.125	47.519	.000	.333
Pretest scores	14.316	1	14.316	83.720	.000	.468
Proficiency Level (PL)	1.216	1	1.216	7.109	.009	.070
Group	4.120	1	4.120	24.092	.000	.202
PL * Group	.196	1	.196	1.145	.287	.012
Error	16.244	95	.171			
Total	1141.000	100				
Corrected Total	58.590	99				

The ANCOVA results in Table 2 demonstrated a significant main effect for the Group factor, indicating a statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups' posttest scores after controlling for the initial differences in their writing performance, $F(1,95) = 24.092$, $p < 0.001$. Further, the partial eta squared value (0.202) indicated that approximately 20% of the variance in the dependent variable (posttest scores) was explainable by the type of writing instruction employed to teach the learners. Additionally, the interaction between the Group and Proficiency Level was found to be statistically non-significant, $F (1, 95) = 1.145$, $p = .287$; that is, the treatments' effect was not dependent on the learner's English proficiency level.

Addressing the Third Research Question

A detailed descriptive analysis of the learners' attitude towards the register-based instruction is displayed in Tables 3, 4, and 5, each representing the learners' perspective on one of the three sub-domains of the questionnaire.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of the Learners' Overall Satisfaction with the Course

No.	Statement	PL	SD	D	U	A	SA	*M*	*SD*
1	I enjoyed English learning more than before.	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	1 4%	13 52%	11 44%	4.40	.58
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	3 12%	12 48%	10 40%	4.28	.68
2	I will recommend this type of class to my friends.	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	1 4%	12 48%	12 48%	4.44	.58
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	3 12%	13 52%	9 36%	4.24	.66
3	I am unwilling to take part in a register-based course similar to this one.	Advanced	11 36%	11 44%	3 12%	0 0%	0 0%	1.68	.69
		Intermediate	7 28%	15 60%	3 12%	0 0%	0 0%	1.84	.62
4	I think such courses should be widely used in writing classes.	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	3 12%	15 60%	7 28%	4.16	.62
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	6 24%	15 60%	4 16%	3.92	.64
5	I am eager to attend other register-based classes.	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	8 32%	16 64%	1 4%	3.72	.54
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	7 28%	15 60%	3 12%	3.84	.62

As depicted in Table 4, both intermediate and advanced participants of the study expressed their satisfaction from experiencing the register-based writing course since the average of the scales they used to evaluate all the items except the third one was at least one standard deviation above the neutral scale (3). The learners' serious disagreement on item #3 (a reverse-worded item) was indicative of their willingness to participate in similar register-based courses.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of the Learners' Perception of Their Writing Achievement and Affective Outcomes

No.	Statement	PL	SD	D	U	A	SA	*M*	*SD*
1	My writing has improved a lot	Advanced	0 0%	1 4%	0 0%	13 52%	11 44%	4.36	.70
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	3 12%	12 48%	10 40%	4.28	.68
2	I can complete a writing assignment even when it is challenging	Advanced	0 0%	1 4%	4 16%	20 80%	0 0%	3.76	.52
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	9 36%	16 64%	0 0%	3.64	.48
3	I can analyze and focus on what I am writing.	Advanced	0 0%	1 4%	5 20%	19 76%	0 0%	3.72	.54

		Intermediate	0 0%	1 4%	7 28%	17 68%	0 0%	3.64	.61
4	I will volunteer to write about different issues.	Advanced	0 0%	3 12%	3 12%	14 56%	5 20%	3.84	.90
		Intermediate	0 0%	4 16%	7 28%	12 48%	2 8%	3.48	.87
5	Writing no longer sounds that difficult.	Advanced	0 0%	2 8%	6 24%	17 68%	0 0%	3.60	.64
		Intermediate	0 0%	2 8%	8 32%	11 44%	4 16%	3.68	.85
6	I noticed no significant improvement in my writing.	Advanced	16 64%	9 36%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1.36	.50
		Intermediate	12 48%	13 52%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1.52	.51
7	The course has improved my self-confidence in writing.	Advanced	0 0%	2 8%	3 12%	14 56%	6 24%	3.96	.84
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	11 44%	10 40%	4 16%	3.72	.69
8	Writing on a particular topic takes me less time than it did before.	Advanced	0 0%	3 12%	5 20%	16 64%	1 4%	3.60	.76
		Intermediate	0 0%	1 4%	8 32%	12 48%	4 16%	3.76	.78

Having evaluated the learners' responses to different items related to their perception of the course's outcomes in terms of writing achievement and affective experiences, diverse results were drawn. According to the results in Table 5, an absolute majority of the learners' (96% of the advanced and 88% of the intermediate learners) believed that their writing has improved as a result of the study course. They also expressed favorable opinion on items #2, 3, and 7 taking the average and standard deviation amounts into consideration. Nevertheless, they expressed ambivalent attitude towards the other items. The learners' strong disagreement on item #4 (a reverse worded item) was a testimony of their agreement on the usefulness of the instruction in improving their writing achievement.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics of the Learners' Attitude towards Specific Elements of the Course

No.	Statement	PL	SD	D	U	A	SA	*M*	*SD*
1	Explicit instruction of register components was really useful.	Advanced	0 0%	1 4%	0 0%	14 56%	10 40%	4.32	.69
		Intermediate	0 0%	3 12%	0 0%	19 76%	3 12%	3.88	.70
2	The teaching method had a great effect on my writing.	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	1 4%	17 68%	7 28%	4.24	.52
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	3 12%	10 40%	12 48%	4.36	.70
3	The teacher was really effective in improving my writing.	Advanced	0 0%	1 4%	6 24%	10 40%	8 32%	4.00	.87
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	8 32%	16 64%	1 4%	3.72	.54
4	I feel the course put an undue burden of register analysis on me.	Advanced	9 36%	13 52%	3 12%	0 0%	0 0%	1.76	.66
		Intermediate	10 40%%	10 40%	5 20%	0 0%	0 0%	1.80	.76
5	Provided feedback helped me to become aware of my weak points	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	2 8%	15 60%	8 32%	4.24	.60
		Intermediate	0 0%	1 4%	5 20%	14 56%	5 20%	3.92	.76
6	Register instruction was the most important part of the course	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	15 60%	10 40%	4.40	.50
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	14 56%	11 44%	4.44	.51
7	Pre-writing activities including register analysis of model texts and co-construction of the first drafts were really useful.	Advanced	0 0%	0 0%	1 4%	8 32%	16 64%	4.60	.58
		Intermediate	0 0%	0 0%	3 12%	7 28%	15 60%	4.48	.71

According to the results in Table 5, all the items of the questionnaire (except item #4 which was framed against the register-based instruction) were validated by the majority of the learners since the mean values were all at least one standard deviation above the neutral scale (3). As shown in Table 5, the learners had the most favorable attitudes towards item #7 (Advanced: *M*=4.60, *SD*=.58; Intermediate: *M*= 4.48, *SD*=.71), which concerned the usefulness of pre-writing activities.

Discussion

The quantitative analysis of the learners' performance on the pre- and posttest measures revealed a significant main effect for the SFL-oriented

register instruction on the learners' writing performance. In other terms, those learners who received SFL-based instruction in expository register outperformed their counterparts who were taught through a conventional method of writing instruction. Given that the specific register-based instruction of the study was underpinned by the SFL theory, the findings corroborated the widely-held view expressed in the literature (e.g., Cahyono, 2018; Lirola, 2010) on the applicability of SFL framework to teaching writing. The finding is also in line with a great number of the previous studies (e.g., Brisk & Zisselberger, 2010; Chiang, 2013, Mosayebnazhad & Assadi Aidinlou, 2011; Schulze, 2011) which validated the usefulness of an SFL-oriented writing instruction in various EFL contexts.

A logical reason to vindicate the effectiveness of the register-based instruction rooted in SFL may its capability to pinpoint areas which needed explicit instruction during the pre-writing stage. The contributory role of SFL-based analysis of language productions in the identification of challenges learners face while language learning has been already validated by several researchers (e.g., Iddings, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004). Additionally, the in-depth analysis of the model texts probing into lexico-grammatical features and portraying an expository register in terms of field, tenor and mode may have provided the learners with further background knowledge of the areas unfamiliar to them. The beneficial effect of explicitly raising students' awareness of the lexico-grammatical features that characterize academic register on their progress towards advanced literacy has been previously confirmed by research (e.g., Brisk, 2014; Byrnes, 2009; Colombi, 2002; Schulze, 2011). Such an awareness, as concluded by Brisk (2014), can divert students' attention from formal rules and take them beyond the sentence level by focusing their attention on the choices a particular register demands.

As another theory, the significant role of the SFL-oriented register instruction in enhancing the learners' writing performance would be attributed to its due consideration in addressing a wide range of contributory factors in effective writing. The instruction was aimed at shifting the scope of writing instruction from a focus on language per se to a comprehensive focus on the context, purpose, audience, and language. Being attuned to the choices well-suited to the context of situation specific to expository writing, the learners of the experimental groups were actually provided with adequate level of scaffolding in all processes involved in writing so as to construct meaning and communicate their message in the most appropriate

way. To support such a claim, a common finding of some previous studies (e.g., Iddings, 2008; Fang & Schleppgrell, 2008) was taken into consideration. In a good agreement with what has been found in the current study, the aforesaid studies revealed that a comprehensive and explicit instruction of register and genre results in the appropriateness of language productions.

The study results also testified that the efficacy of the instruction in enhancing the learners' writing performance was independent of their English proficiency level, inasmuch as both intermediate and advanced learners of the study improved significantly in terms of writing ability after receiving the instruction. As evidenced by the literature, the interaction between language proficiency and context-based writing instructions such as instruction on register is still an unexplored area of interest. Nonetheless, research on teaching methodologies aimed at promoting structural and discoursal familiarity revealed that EFL learners' of different language proficiency would be the beneficiaries of such instructions. Studies carried out by several scholars (e.g., Assadi Aidinlou, 2012; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Grabe & Stoller, 2002) provided adequate support for such view. Acknowledging EFL learners' common need for being equipped with an acceptable degree of familiarity with linguistic and structural elements of any specific genre, it seems reasonable that the register-based writing instruction profited all the participants involved in the study to improve in terms of writing performance, regardless of their English proficiency level.

In another phase, the study delved deeply into the participants' perception of the register-based instruction they were provided with during the study course. Having explored the learners' opinion about three different sub-domains including overall satisfaction with the course, perception of writing achievement and affective outcomes, and attitude towards specific elements of the course, the results revealed a positive view to the instruction. Based on the descriptive statistics estimated for every individual item of the questionnaire, both intermediate and advanced learners were fond of different elements of the study course such as explicit instruction on register components, feedback provided by the instructor, and the teaching methodology followed by the instructor. The inclusion of register analysis of the model texts and co-construction of the first drafts in the pre-writing phase were the components favoured the most by the learners. Despite the paucity of learner-focused research on SFL-oriented writing instructions, particularly one probing into EFL learner perception of a register-based instruction, the finding approximates to what has been revealed based on the Trong's (2011) study on EFL learners' attitude towards a genre-based

writing instruction. Having employed the teaching/learning cycle to improve writing in recount genre, Trong (2011) came to a conclusion that deconstruction of model texts as well as joint-construction of a similar text is recognized by the learners as a necessary and useful pre-writing stage.

Concerning the learners' perception of the course's outcomes, the learners' expressed positive attitude towards the capability of the instruction to enhance their writing performance and help them to successfully accomplish the writing assignments. They also corroborated the statements framed in favour of the course's acceptability to boost their focus and self-confidence while writing. Nonetheless, they expressed ambivalent attitudes towards a couple of items probing into their perception of the course's capacity to eliminate the inherent difficulty of writing in a foreign language, accelerate writing on a particular topic, and foster willingness to write about different issues. These findings reinforced the study of Yang (2012) on a genre-based approach to teaching ESP writing. In harmony with what has been found in the current study, the importance of analysing model exemplars in terms of various linguistic and contextual elements used in a particular genre and its beneficial impact on confidence in composing text was approved by the learners involved in the Yang's (2012) study. Regarding overall satisfaction with the study course, the learners, on average, agreed that the instruction provided them with an enjoyable learning environment, hence they recommended taking part in similar register-based courses to learn writing as well as other language learning skills.

Conclusion

Having considered all the findings discussed above, it was concluded that the application of an SFL-oriented register instruction would be beneficial to Iranian EFL learners of different proficiency levels helping them develop a standard level of writing competence in an environment favorable to learning. Being directly associated with writing achievement in an EFL context, the concluding remarks elicited from the current study may propose several pedagogical implications which can be capitalized as guidelines for writing instruction. As the most prominent one, the findings may stimulate EFL teachers to embark on alleviating the difficulty of writing in a foreign language engaging their students in conducting pre-writing register-based analysis of the model texts so as to provide them with a background knowledge of lexico-grammatical features mainly used in a specific genre of writing. Being exposed to such a teaching methodology, EFL learners are hoped to not only make success in enlarging their repertoire of the

grammatical patterns and vocabulary pertaining to a particular context of situation, but also derive real satisfaction from learning as they have already been equipped with the knowledge on how to write. The findings may also urge EFL syllabus designers and material developers to enrich academic writing textbooks with register-based instructional materials typical of any particular genre.

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