Research Article

Reading to Write or Discussing to Write: Which One Works Better?

Mahnaz Abbasi[1], Ali Amirghassemi[2]

[1]Department of English, Payame-e Noor University, Tehran, Iran
[2]Department of English, Marand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Marand, Iran
*Corresponding author: amirqasemi@marandiau.ac.ir

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effect of reading-based vs. discussion-based pre-writing activities on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, a quasi-experimental study was conducted with 40 Iranian intermediate EFL learners within16 to 20 age range who were selected based on their performance on an Oxford Solution Proficiency Test. They were assigned to two experimental groups: Reading Group and Discussion Group. The former group was made to involve in some reading activity prior to doing the main writing task, and the latter group was made to participate in a discussion activity before the main writing task. After the treatment for 10 sessions, both groups were post-tested. The pre-test and post-test involved free compositions, which were scored analytically. The findings indicated that both groups' writing ability improved over the course of the study, but the difference between the performances of the groups on the post-test was not statistically significant although the Reading group's mean score was greater than the Discussion group. The results of this study have some implications for students, language teachers, syllabus designers and material developers.

Keywords: pre-writing activity, reading pre-activity, discussion pre-activity, writing ability

Introduction

In a view, writing is an indicator of students' success in learning English language and their future professional careers (Nurjanah, 2012). However, writing is not an easy task for EFL learners to master. According to Nunun (1999), "in terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in languages" (p. 271). Many EFL learners, even the proficient ones, experience a lot of difficulty finding relevant forms and ideas, and therefore, the writings they produce often fail to efficiently reflect their thoughts and language abilities (Moghaddas & Zakariazadeh, 2011). Researchers point to two major reasons for L2 writing dilemma: One is the differences between the L2 and the learner's native language in formal features, thought patterns and rhetorical conventions, and the other is language instructors' failure in providing L2 writers with appropriate techniques and preparatory strategies (Marshi & Hematabadi, 2011; Moghaddas & Zakariazadeh, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2018). Marshi and Hematabadi (2011), commenting on the instruction of English L2 writing in the Iranian context, complains that it is often limited to the three-stage procedure of giving a topic by the teacher, writing by the learner, and evaluating or providing some feedback by the teacher. They contend that such an approach to writing is counterproductive and demotivating.

The complexity of writing and L2 learners' difficulty in eliciting ideas have driven researchers and teachers alike to think of ways that aid L2 learners in accessing ideas hidden in their minds and putting them on paper (Arju, 2017). Some have proposed the use of pre-writing strategies. According to Chastain (1988), one effective and efficient way to help students overcome the difficulty of getting started in writing classes is adequate preparation for writing through making use of pre-writing activities. She maintains that teachers should be creative and use different pre-writing activities which prepare students to perform better in writing assignments. Mahnam and Nejadansari (2012) emphasize the use of pre-writing activities in writing courses as a means to construct knowledge and foster writing. Go (1994) considers pre-writing activity as "… more than just a gimmick, as cynics claim, but a structured design to energize student participation in thinking, talking, group interaction, and skeletal writing such as building the components of a writing task" (p. 2). Employing pre-writing activities in the writing classrooms, according to Rau and Sebrechts (1996), causes more variations to text content than text syntax, and the resulting compositions are more likely to be refined and creative. Lindemann (1995, as cited in Adams, 1995) argues that pre-writing helps students to explore what they know; it also enables them to recall ideas, evaluate the expectations of reader, relate

old and new information, and explore the problem from many angles. The pre-writing phase is mainly concerned with motivating students to write about a topic which they find interesting and fit into their existing schemata (Hafernik, 1984, as cited in Chastain, 1988). Hawthorne (2008) points out that interesting topics have positive influence on students' writing, since they create a connection between what students know about a topic and what they value. Pre-writing activities cause students to create ideas, make notes, plan and organize the ideas into a blueprint of what they are going to write (Davis, 2020; Graham and Perin, 2007). All in all, literature supports the incorporation of prewriting activities into the L2 writing class; however, as Joaquin, Kim and Shin (2016) contend, in spite of the fact that L2 teachers often teach prewriting strategies to their students to help them find and lay out ideas, not sufficient attention has been given to whether or not and what kinds of prewriting strategies are actually beneficial to L2 writers.

Go (1994) classifies pre-writing activities into oral, written or illustrative, which students can perform by themselves, in groups or in pairs. According to him, more skilled and experienced teachers prefer to use those prewriting activities that are a blend of process-oriented and product-oriented approaches. Reading is a process which involves the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to perform an exchange of information from one individual to another. Learners cannot become effective writers without the assistance of reading; therefore, they need to see and experience how the written language works (Giesen, 2001). Krashen (1989, as cited in Tabatabaei & Amin Ali, 2012) believes that when the texts that are presented to students are interesting and understandable enough, reading can become comprehensible input for them. His research on reading exposure confirms that reading increases reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, positively affecting the grammatical development and writing style. According to Krashen (1984, as cited in Zainal & Mohamed Husin, 2011), reading can contribute to the development of writing by serving as a good source of linguistic knowledge that the L2 learner can tap into for activating their schema for producing a piece of writing. Similarly, in Giesen's (2001) opinion, learners can use readings as a model for their writing or they can write about readings.

Also, some empirical studies addressing the impact of reading activities on writing indicate that what learners read does in fact affect what they write. A study by Brodney, Reeves and Kazelskis (1999) showed that the type of pre-writing treatment received by students before composing expository essays significantly influences their compositions quality. Their study found reading to

be an effective pre-task activity in improving the student writers' organization and development of ideas for the writing task. Similarly, Armani (1994) concluded that the use of literature or reading as a pre-writing activity resulted in significantly higher writing scores for the L2 learners. Juel (1988) demonstrated the effectiveness of extensive reading (or listening to a lot of stories) in generating ideas for writing. Moghaddas and Zakariazadeh (2011) compared reading comprehension texts and videos, as two pre-writing activities, and showed videos to produce more positive effects on L2 learners' writing. Zaid (2011) compared two experimental groups doing online reading and multimedia concept mapping, as pre-writing activities, and a control group with no pre-writing treatment. Although the study did not show significant differences among the groups, the experimental ones wrote longer and richer compositions Tabatabaei and Amin Ali (2012) found that various reading tasks used as pre-writing activities had significant effect on the pre- and post-intermediate EFL learners writing performance. They also showed that different types of reading texts differently affect the learners' writing performance. This latter result was also achieved by Qin and Liu (2021) who showed that learners who read texts with opposing ideas and views produce better argumentative writings than those reading texts containing similar views.

On the other hand, Larson (2000) considers discussion an effective teaching technique to foster higher-order thinking skills, those skills that allow students to interpret, analyse and manipulate information. Brookfield and Pereskill (1999) define discussion "as an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique" (p. 5). Learning in group or pair may bring positive outcomes to students when they want to write in L2 (Weissberg, 2006, as cited in Liao, 2010). Shi (1998) speaks of the popularity of speaking activities like discussions in ESL writing classes. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2008, as cited in Mostowski, 2013) emphasize the importance of oral exchange among students and teacher in the pre-writing stage to provide students with opportunities to organize and evaluate their own ideas, use their thought and verify the content of sentences and paragraphs. Adil Karim (2010) considers pre-writing discussion a technique that allows students to share their thoughts and develop new ideas and linguistic patterns.

As for empirical studies on the effect of discussion on writing, Sweigart (1991) investigated what kinds of pre-writing discussions were more effective. His findings indicated that of three treatments (lecture, class discussion, and student-led small-group discussion), small-group discussion was more useful for students to develop their knowledge before starting to write. In another study done by Xianwei (2009), the students in the discussion

groups wrote more fluently than the other groups and the quality of compositions written by the English discussion group was significantly better with fewer errors and higher syntactical complexity than those of the other groups. Mirzaei and Eslami (2013) showed that pre-writing group discussions in which the members' ZPDs are activated could highly improve the quality of their writings. Nguyen et al. (2018) compared the effectiveness of the pre-writing strategies of group discussion and free writing on Vietnamese university students' argumentative writings. The findings revealed that both strategies had positive effect on the students' writing productivity and quality, but free writing was more beneficial to productivity.

Although there are studies on the effects of reading as well as discussion pre-writing activities on students' writing ability, there are hardly studies that have compared the two types of pre-writing activities. The present study is a contribution to planning strategy before writing in an Iranian EFL context. Its objective is to find out whether reading and discussion activities prior to writing task can significantly affect Iranian L2 learners writing ability, and also which planning strategy, reading or discussion, could be more helpful for improving their writing skill. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

1- Do the pre-writing activities of reading and discussion have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?

2- Is there a significant difference between the pre-writing activities of reading and discussion on improving Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?

And based on the research questions, the following null hypotheses were stated:

H01- The pre-writing activities of Reading and Discussion have no significant effect on Iranian EFL students' writing ability.

H02- There is no statistically significant difference between the pre-writing activities of Reading and Discussion on improving Iranian EFL learners' writing ability.

Method

Participants

Originally, 100 students were selected for this study. Most of these learners were female Iranian high school students in the age range of 16-20 years who were studying general English at E'tebar Institute in Marand (a small town in East Azarbaijan, Iran). All the students were bilinguals of Persian and Azarbayjani Turkish. A standardized language proficiency test (i.e. Oxford Solution Proficiency Test) was administered to determine their level of English proficiency. Forty students whose score were between 47 and 70 in

the OPT test were selected for this study. The selected students were then randomly assigned to two groups: Reading and Discussion groups (each including 20 students).

Instruments

For the purposes of subject selection, a standardized language proficiency test (i.e., Oxford Solution Proficiency Test) developed by Linda Edwards (Oxford University Press, 2007) was conducted. According to the scoring guidelines of this test, the scores between 47 and 70 were used to place the students into the intermediate level of proficiency. Based on the results, 40 students whose scores fitted into the mentioned score range were selected.

To measure the participants' writing ability before and after the treatment, a teacher-made pre-test and post-test on writing were used. The topics for the pre-test and post-test (and for the treatment) were taken from the students' textbook, Concepts and Comments (Ackert & Lee, 2005). For the Reading group, the texts involved in the textbook served as the pre-writing reading materials, and for the Discussion group, they served as a source for the teacher to provide the learners with relevant ideas for discussion (see the Appendix for a sample text). The main criterion for topic selection was learners' familiarity with the topics as well as their eagerness to generate ideas based on the assigned topics.

The students' writings were scored based on Jacobs et al.'s (1981) analytic scoring scale. The scale addresses five components of writing: Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Grammar and Mechanics, each of which is scored separately. The Content component evaluates the presence of main ideas, development of ideas, and supporting ideas with appropriate examples. The Organization component deals with the sequence of ideas and the use of cohesive devices. Vocabulary component measures the word/idiom choice. The Grammar component considers grammatical accuracy and complexity, and the Mechanics component is to do with punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and paragraphing. Hughes (2003) argues that assigning a number of scores causes the scoring to be more reliable, and according to Tahmouresi (2014), Jacob et al.'s scale enjoys the required content validity as it offers detailed diagnostic information about different aspects of learners' writing performance.

Design

This quantitative study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test – treatment – post-test structure. There were two experimental groups: The Reading group and Discussion group. The independent variable was the

pre-activity type (i.e., reading vs. discussion) and the dependent variable was the participants' scores on the writing post-test.

Procedure

Before the treatment, a pilot study was conducted with 25 students of intermediate level from the same language Institute where the main study was conducted. The aim of pilot study was to check the suitability of the instruments and materials that were to be used in the main study.

In the first session of the study, 100 students took the Oxford Solution Proficiency test. From these 100 students, 40 students whose scores, according to scoring rubrics of the test, fell within the intermediate proficiency level were selected to participate in the study. Then they were divided into two groups, each consisting of 20 students: the Reading group and Discussion Group.

In the second session, the pre-test was administered to both groups. The students were required to write two paragraphs on two topics in about 50 minutes' time. The topics, as mentioned before, were derived from students' textbook on the basis of their familiarity and interest.

The treatment started from the third session and took 10 sessions. Each session met once a week and lasted for an hour and a half. The first half or so of the class time was allocated to writing, during which the students in both groups were given a topic and asked to write a composition about it. However, before the writing task, the students in two groups were made to do different pre-writing tasks: one group undertook the 'reading' activity and the other the 'discussion' activity.

For the Reading group, the teacher (the first author) introduced a topic, and in order to prepare the students for the writing task, she asked them to read a text about the topic. For some topics, the students' textbook provided the relevant material and for some others the teacher passed around hand-outs. After reading the text, the students were asked to write a composition in about 30 minutes by incorporating what they had read.

As for the Discussion group, the teacher divided the students into several groups (five groups of 4). Each session, the teacher gave the class a topic (the same as that given to 'Reading' group) and asked them to talk about the topic and then produce together a composition based on their talks. To encourage the groups to talk, the teacher gave each group a piece of paper on which there were some questions about the writing topic. The students could use the questions as a trigger for expressing their ideas. She also rotated in the class, interacting with each group and pushing them towards expressing themselves.

The session immediately following the treatment, the students in both groups sat the post-test, which contained the same two topics as the pre-test. The objective was to compare the progress of the groups after the treatment.

Results

The scores obtained from the pre-test and post-test were the main source of the data for this study. The participants' pre-test and post-test were scored by three raters based on Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring scale for writing, which provided the opportunity for examining the inter-rarer reliability of the test scores. Since the raters had already reached some agreement on the criteria of scoring different aspects of a student's writing, a relatively acceptable reliability coefficient was obtained. The Pearson product Moment Correlation (r) for the pre-test was 0.71 and for the post-test was 0.73.

In order to find out whether the treatment had any effect on the students' writing ability, each group's pre-test and post-test performances were compared. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each group's performance on the pre-test and post-test.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for the Two Groups' Performance on the Pre-test and Post-test

Pre-test				Post-test			
Group	N	Mean	SD	Group	N	Mean	SD
Reading	20	42.40	6.64	Reading	20	51.07	6.38
Discussion	20	41.45	7.89	Discussion	20	48.05	7.87

To check the normality of the distribution of scores, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were run, which showed that the groups' pre-test and post-test scores had normal distributions (Table 2).

Table 2
Tests of Normality

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Group	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	Reading	.144	20	.200	.930	20	.152
	Discussion	.163	20	.169	.948	20	.336
Posttest	Reading	.138	20	.200	.937	20	.211
	Discussion	.167	20	.146	.936	20	.201

To see whether each group had a significant progress from the pre-test to the post-test, two paired-samples t-tests were run. The results (Table 3) demonstrated that the difference between the pre- and post-test performances of each group was statistically significant, implying that both pre-writing

activities (Reading and Discussion) were effective in improving the students' writing skill ($t = 7.99$, $df = 19$, $p = 0.00$ for the Reading Group; $t = 11.77$, $df = 19$, $p = 0.00$ for the Discussion Group). Consequently, the first hypothesis of the study (i.e., the pre-writing activities of reading and discussion have no significant effect on the development Iranian EFL learners' writing) was rejected. Table 3 shows the inferential statistics for the progress of each group from the pre-test to the post-test.

Table 3
Paired-samples t-test for the two groups' progress from the pre-test to post-test

	Paired Differences							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Reading posttest-pretest	8.67500	4.85114	1.08475	6.40460	10.94540	7.996	19	.000
Discussion posttest-pretest	6.60000	2.50578	.56031	5.42726	7.77274	11.779	19	.000

In addition, to find out whether there was a statistically significant difference between the effects of the pre-activity strategies following the treatment, the two groups' performances on the post-test were compared. To this end, an ANCOVA was used. The ANCOVA allows for comparison between groups after the treatment while statistically controlling for their differences in the pre-test (the covariate). To run the ANCOVA, assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of regression slopes and homogeneity of variances had to be met. The normality assumption was already checked through the tests of normality mentioned above. The linearity assumption (i.e., the relationship between each group's pre-test scores and post-test scores must be linear) was examined graphically. Figure 1 shows the relationship.
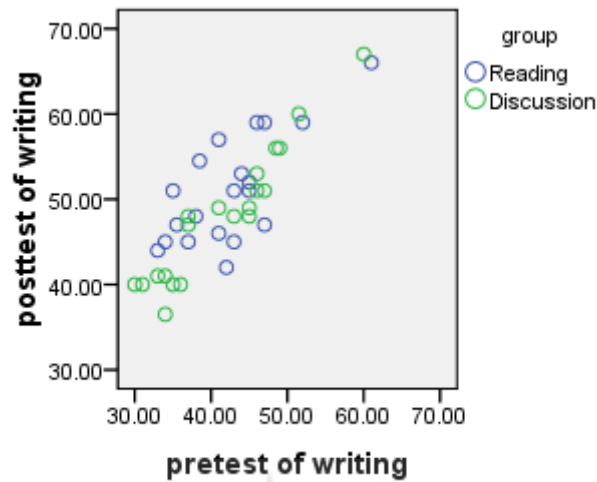
Figure 1. Relationship between the dependent variable and covariate for each group

As the scatterplot shows, the pretest and posttest scores of writing for both groups form straight lines, implying that the linearity assumption is met. The assumption of the homogeneity of regression slopes was checked by examining the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects. According to the assumption, there must not be statistically significant interaction between the independent variable and the covariate. Table 4 displays the results.

Table 4
Tests of between-subjects effects for the homogeneity of regression slopes

Sources	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1557.776	3	519.259	38.557	.000
Intercept	251.179	1	251.179	18.651	.000
Group	44.253	1	44.253	3.286	.078
Pretest	1323.104	1	1323.104	98.247	.000
Group * Pretest	31.030	1	31.030	2.304	.138
Error	484.817	36	13.467		
Total	100300.250	40			
Corrected Total	2024.594	39			

a. R squared = .763 (Adjusted R Squared = .744)

As table 4 shows, the p-value for the interaction between group and pretest is .138, which is greater than alpha level (.05), implying that the interaction is not significant.

As for the assumption of the homogeneity of variances, the Levene's test was used, which indicated that the variances of the groups were equal, as the p-value was greater than the alpha level (Table 5).

Table 5
Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig.
2.817	1	38	.101

After making sure that all the underlying assumptions were not violated, the ANCOVA was run to test the hypotheses. The results of the analysis are demonstrated in Table 6.

Table 6
Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA)

Sources	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1526.746[a]	2	763.373	54.754	.000
Intercept	227.830	1	227.830	16.341	.000
pretest	1435.240	1	1435.240	102.945	.000
group	49.294	1	49.294	3.536	.068
Error	515.848	37	13.942		
Total	100300.250	40			
Corrected Total	2042.594	39			

a. R Squared = .747 (adjusted R. Squared = .734)

According to the results, after controlling for the effects of the pre-test scores, no statistically significant difference was found between the two groups' post-test scores, $F (1, 37) = 3.536$, $p = .068$. It can be implied that both types of pre-task activities (Reading and Discussion) had similar effects on the students' writing performance on the post-test, although the mean score of the Reading group, based on the descriptive statistics, was higher than that of the Discussion group. In this way, the second null hypothesis of the study (i.e., there is not a significant difference between the pre-writing activities of reading and discussion on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability) was supported. However, it is noteworthy that, despite the lack of significant difference between the two groups, the p-value for the group effect narrowly misses the conventional alpha level of .05; thus, a trend should be recognized in favour of the Reading group.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare two pre-activities of reading and discussion to find out whether they can significantly improve a sample of Iranian EFL learners' writing, and if so, which one would be more effective. The overall findings indicated that both groups of students' writing ability improved over the course of the study, and the improvement was statistically significant. The results also revealed that reading had affected the students' overall writing ability more than discussion, but the difference between these two prewriting activities was not significant.

The results of this study are in line with the some researchers' views on the importance of pre-writing activities (e.g., Adil Karim, 2010; Arju, 2017; Graham and Perin, 2007; Hassannejad, 2012; Hawthorne, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2018). Efficient writing is hardly developed in isolation and is reliant on outside sources. Pre-writing activities, by providing L2 learners with some background knowledge, seem to motivate them to venture the demanding task of writing.

Regarding the effect of reading, as a pre-writing activity, on writing ability of the students, the findings of this study are in line with several previous studies which concluded that through activating both formal and cognitive schema of L2 learners, reading could serve as an efficient way of improving their writing (e.g., Brodney, Reeves & Kazelskis, 1999; Daniels, Kasnic & McCluskey, 1988; Mahnam & Nejadansari, 2012; Zainal & Mohamed Husin, 2011). Some researchers have also suggested that writing and reading should be taught together (e.g., Blanchard, 1988; Cooney, Darcy & Casey, 2018; Giesen, 2001; Grabe & Zhang, 2013). Tierney and Leys (1984) argue the type and amount of reading materials writers are exposed to might influence their choice of topic, writing style, vocabulary and values concerning writing. Similarly, as shown by Tabatabaei and Amin Ali (2012), and more recently by Qin and Liu (2021), reading texts with different rhetorical organizations bring about different writing productions by L2 learners, an area which warrants more research in the Iranian context.

As regards the effect of discussion as a pre-task for writing, the results of this study support the findings of such researchers as Ammon (1985), Edelsky (1982), Hiblenbrand (1985) and Zamel (1983), who observed that peer review and group discussion could develop a sense of confidence and self-worth in EFL students, making them generate more related content and organize their essays more logically. The findings of this study also agree with some researchers' view that discussion or talking about a topic prior to writing can help students to write better (e.g., Mahnam & Nejadansari, 2012; Mirzaei & Eslami, 2013; Naghavi & Nakhleh, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018).

It seems that discussion, as a pre-writing activity, can help L2 learners develop their writing by providing them with a linguistic and organizational direction. When L2 learners become engaged in group discussions, ideas are raised, exchanged, debated, accepted or rejected, and this gives the student writer a linguistic source to tap into and helps them organize their writing more confidently and efficiently. Of course, it should be noted that the present study was conducted with a group of intermediate students. Discussion may not be a suitable writing pre-task for low proficient students, who lack enough linguistic resources to participate in discussions.

In the current study, the Reading group's mean score was higher than the Discussion group, and the inferential statistics showed a trend in favour of the former, implying that reading pre-task was more helpful in developing L2 learners' writing. This might be accounted for by the availability of the reading material for the Reading group. In differentiating written language from spoken language, Brown (1994) points out that "oral language is transitory and must be processed in real time, while written language is permanent and can be read and reread as often as one likes" (cited in Weigle, 2002, p. 15). The Reading group had the reading material at hand and could refer to it for bringing to mind the key lexical items as well as the structure of the text. On the other hand, the difference between the writing performances of the two groups was not statistically significant, implying that the discussion pre-task had a similar effect on the students' writing to the reading pre-task. It seems that the transient and ephemeral state of oral texts in the Discussion group might have been compensated by the employing redundancy strategies like repetition and elaboration. Redundancy is typical of spoken discourse and "helps the hearer to process meaning by offering more time and extra information" (Brown, 2001, p. 252). Another reason has to do with group dynamics. The success of the Discussion group could also be attributed to their increased motivation due to participation in conversational interactions. The students in the Discussion group felt satisfied when they expressed, or were encouraged to express, their ideas through speaking, and since discussion served as a pre-task with no grades, the students felt comfortable with it and had fun interacting with their peers and noting down the necessary linguistic information for their main writing task. It seems that given the proper level of proficiency, appropriate task organization and lowering affective filter, involving L2 students in discussion activities can be an efficient way for motivating them into using language.

The present study showed that pre-writing activities, both through reading and speaking, could positively affect L2 learners' writing. According to

Barnhardt (1997, as cited in Talebinezhad & Negari, 2009), the positive change that occurs in L2 learners who have long had difficulties in writing in a foreign language could be related to a large extent to their success in using pre-writing activities, suggesting that having a mental map of how to go about a writing task is more likely to cause students to produce well-organized compositions.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from the findings of this study: a) providing L2 learners with preparatory activities before the main writing activity can significantly affect the quality and quantity of their writing, and b) reading might be the most effective pre-writing activity, but speaking, in the form of oral interaction, if appropriately designed and geared to the learners' proficiency level, can be equally helpful.

Declaration of Interest: none

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Biodata

Mahnaz Abbasi got her MA in TEFL from Payam-e Noor University of Tehran. She has taught English for several years in different institutes. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the English department of the Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch.

Ali Amirghassemi holds a Ph.D. degree in Applied Linguistics. He is an assistant professor at Islamic Azad University, Marand Branch. He has been teaching English courses at university for many years and has published a number of articles in national and international journals. His main research interests include form-focused instruction, corrective feedback and L2 writing.