

Investigating the Effects of Unlimited Time and Access to Dictionaries on EFL Learners' Writing Performance

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[Abstract] The present study aimed to investigate the impact of providing unlimited time and access to dictionaries on the writing performance of 50 intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at a private language institute. Proficiency tests were administered as pre-tests to ensure the homogeneity of learners in terms of proficiency levels. Subsequently, a writing test was conducted in the first session of the academic semester for both control and experimental groups. The writing test allowed intermediate learners one hour to compose on a given topic, with a scoring method deducting half a mark for each grammatical error, focusing on writing accuracy. Following the pre-test, the experimental group had unlimited time and access to dictionaries for their writing activities throughout the academic semester, while the control group adhered to conventional instructional methods without these privileges. At the end of the semester, the same writing test was administered as a post-test. The collected data from pre and post-tests were analyzed, revealing that unlimited time and access to dictionaries significantly influenced EFL learners' writing performance. A notable difference was observed between the control and experimental groups concerning their writing performances.

[Keywords] time constraints, EFL learners, writing performance, dictionaries, language proficiency

Background of the Study

Writing is described as the task of making symbols, forming signs on a flat surface of some type. But writing is obviously much more than the generation of graphic symbols, just as talk is more than the generation of sounds. The symbols have to be ordered to make sentences, though again we can tell 'writing' if we are just forming lists of vocabularies, as in lists of cases such as buying lists (Byrne, 1996).

Moreover, writing is a reflecting mechanism in its own right as White and Arndt (1991) consider. They believe that it requires aware mental attention, which generally has to be maintained over a significant period of time. The student should master this ability via writing true sentences grammatically, structurally, syntactically, and contextually. On the basis of this reality, the student must be able to:

1. Master the processes of letter formations
2. Obey conventions of spelling and punctuation
3. Utilize the grammatical system to transmit one's purposed meaning
4. Polish and modify one's prime attempts
5. Choose a suitable style for one's attendance, and

6. Form meaning at the level of the paragraph and the complicated text to hesitate given knowledge and topic structures (Nunan, 1995).

Some demands are necessary for mastering the writing ability. Ali (1990) discusses that a competent writer should be taught writing interactively. Students must spell based on the convention of the objective language, rein the structure of the language, choose from among feasible combinations of vocabularies and phrases which best transmit their opinions in the most suitable register, and what they transmit should be rationally coherent and linguistically cohesive. As Ali (1990) contends, writing must be stated in the syllabus as a whole skill, and the writing tasks must focus on word order, mechanics of writing, the true choice of vocabularies and phrases together with the utilization of cohesive devices.

The principal topics that the instructor must focus on during writing tasks have been shown by White and Arndt (1996). They express that it is significant for the instructors of writing to engage their learners in that creative mechanism, stimulate them about how to create their writings, foster intuition into how they act in their writing task, and to change their sense of what writing involves (El-Salahat, 2014).

Given this background and the importance of writing in EFL contexts, the current study aimed at investigating the effects of unlimited time and access to dictionaries on EFL Learners' writing performance. To do this, the below objectives are followed:

- Investigating the effects of unlimited time and access to dictionaries on EFL learners' writing performance
- Investigating the differences, if any, between control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances.

Research Questions

The following are questions this study aimed to answer based on the analysis of the primary data collected for the study: 1) Do unlimited time and access to dictionaries affect EFL learners' writing performance? 2) Is there any difference between control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances?

Review of the Literature

In this section, an overview of pertinent empirical studies is presented, contributing to the extant literature on the objectives of the current research paper. Research on the effects of unlimited time and access to dictionaries on EFL learners' writing performance has yielded mixed results. Tananuraksakul (2015) found that the use of online dictionaries can improve students' autonomy and motivation in learning English, but Pyo (2020) noted that while vocabulary scores improved with dictionary use, errors in word usage were common. Hamdi (2015) reported that electronic dictionaries can aid reading comprehension but may be detrimental to vocabulary retention. Liou (2000) suggested that learners with better language proficiency benefit more from dictionary use, but advanced learners may ignore unknown words. These findings highlight the complex relationship between dictionary use and EFL writing performance.

The objective of the research by Sr and Scott (2017) was to investigate the influences, if any, of time constraints on the achievement of accountancy learners doing tests. This research investigated how time permitted to take tests influenced the points on investigations in three various accountancy classes. Two were sophomore classes and one was a senior accountancy class.

This restricted pilot research comprised of a sample size of 80 learners at one college covering one term. Very little research has been run on the influences of time permitted for tests and learner achievement on tests. Learners in this pilot research were given the identical test twice. First, they were permitted four minutes to do the test and then they were permitted 15 minutes to do the identical test. Though learner's gained higher scores on the second test in which they were granted more time, the expository factors did not indicate much of the change between learners.

Biskjaer et al. (2019) exhibited heuristic research-based, qualitative user experiment research of how a writing usage archetype planned to advance text writing by inflicting time constraints influences a productive writing activity among high school learners (n=45). Utilizing presentive investigation, the scholars expressed how implicit and explicit time limitations made into the graphic user connector influenced how users experience time constraint and the quantity vs. quality and reconsidered their productive writing mechanism. The scholars discussed how time constraints can impact creative writing, highlighting the need for improved time management skills and instrument literacy. Through thematic analysis, their research identified four patterns describing how writers constrained by time experience pressure in balancing quantity versus quality, initiating their writing process, and revising their work.

The research of Sadedea et al., (2019) utilized classroom action study to detect the influences of dictionary use to improve learners' vocabulary. Data were gathered by utilizing observation in a 7th grade group of students. Five classes were utilized as treatment and two classes were control classes. Acquiring vocabulary was a very acceptable manner to assist the learners, specifically for EFL learners. The findings indicated that the offline dictionary use did not influence learners' vocabulary significantly.

The research by Pourghasemian and Mozaheb (2020) sought to detect the influences of four design time situations (pre-task, extended task, free writing, and control) on the number of metacognitive strategies used in argumentative and expository writing of 108 learners. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied, using an experimental writing activity plan within four design time situations, and running a retrospective questionnaire. An 8-point Likert-type scale questionnaire and related statistical methods were used. The findings indicated that the number of using a Generation of Ideas strategy was significantly higher in argumentative than in expository writings. The utilization of the Elaboration of Ideas strategy was significantly distinct from the Thinking about Language Aspects strategy and Thinking about the Essay Structure strategy was used least often. The highest strategy usage followed in order of most often used as Thinking about Language Aspects strategy, Thinking about the Essay Structure, Generation of Ideas, Organization of Ideas and Elaboration of Ideas strategies. The utilization of 'Thinking about Language Aspects strategy in the developed activity situation was distinct from the other teams, and it was the smallest. In Thinking about Language Aspects strategy no important differences were seen among argumentative and expository written productions.

The research of Fazilatfar et al., (2020) examined the differential influences of three various design time scenarios (i.e., 0 minutes, 10 minutes, and 20 minutes), as well as three activity situations: (1) subject matter given, (2) subject matter and opinions given, and (3) subject matter, opinions and macrostructure given on EFL students L2 writing difficulty, correctness and clearness. One-hundred-eight male and female learners were randomly placed into three time-situations, each with 36 members. Each time-situation team was itself divided into smaller teams of 12, each with a specific work situation. The findings of differences of the teams who were involved in the argumentative writing work indicated that design time significantly affected the

difficulty of the papers, and the writers in the 20-minute design time team generated more complicated texts contrasted with those in the zero-minute design time team. However, no important influence of work situations, as well as no communication between design time and work situations were detected. Moreover, work situations influenced the total correctness of the writers' achievement in all works. The in pairs contrasts indicated a marginally better correctness of texts in the situation of subject matter, opinions, and macrostructure given as opposed to the subject matter given situation.

Design of the Study

The current research used a quasi-experimental research design with a pre-test, treatment, and post-test design utilizing intact EFL classrooms. Participants in one intact class served as experimental group and got treatment, while the other group formed the control group.

Participants

The population of the current study consisted of intermediate EFL learners at private language institute since there was an inclination that they had problems in composition writing. The population consisted of 50 male learners. The mean age of male participants was 22 and Persian was considered as their first language. There were 25 learners in each class. 25 learners formed experimental group and the other 25 learners served as control group. The setting of the study was at a private language institute in Sepidan, located in Fars province. In this private language institute, English classes were held twice a week, every Sunday and Tuesday and every session was held for 90 minutes.

Instruments

The main instruments of the present study were as follows: **Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)** Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) consists of 60 multiple choice questions on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension. Each question has one point.

Writing Test

In order to assess learning benefits which might have happened as a result of the treatment, a writing test was assigned to participants once as a pre-test and subsequently as a post-test. The participants were given 60 minutes to write on a particular topic before and after the treatment. The topic was appropriate to participants' level of language proficiency. It was adapted from textbook materials with the help of some experienced teachers. The pre-test was administered to participants one session before the treatment and the post-test was run at the last session of the academic semester.

Procedures

There were some procedures to be followed during the study, in order to collect valid data to answer the research questions. At first, the researcher asked permission to the headmaster to run the study in that language institute. Then, the researcher prepared a suitable language proficiency test. OQPT was administered among intermediate EFL learners to make sure about their homogeneity. After making sure about the learners' homogeneity in terms of proficiency level, the writing test was run as pre-test. In fact, in the first session of the academic semester, the researcher gave the writing test to the students in the control and experimental groups. The writing test was

adapted from textbook materials for the examination to intermediate EFL learners and conferred to the English teachers in that language institute. Intermediate learners had one hour to write on the topic. The scoring method was such that half a mark was deducted for each grammatical error, as the focus of this study was on the learners' development in terms of writing accuracy. Then, treatment began. Learners in experimental group had unlimited time and access to dictionaries to their writing activities during an academic semester, but learners in control group did not have unlimited time or access to dictionaries and followed the conventional methods of instruction. After ending the academic semester, the same writing test (as post-test) was run at the final session. The researcher gathered all of the data from pre and post-tests analyzed the collected data and made conclusion as the study.

Results

The objective of the present study was to investigate the effects of unlimited time and access to dictionaries on EFL Learners' writing performance.

Addressing the First Research Question

The first research question was: *Do unlimited time and access to dictionaries affect EFL learners' writing performance?* In order to answer the first research question, the writing scores of learners in experimental group before and after the treatment were contrasted, with results indicated with descriptive statistics of experimental group's performances on pre and post-tests.

Table 1

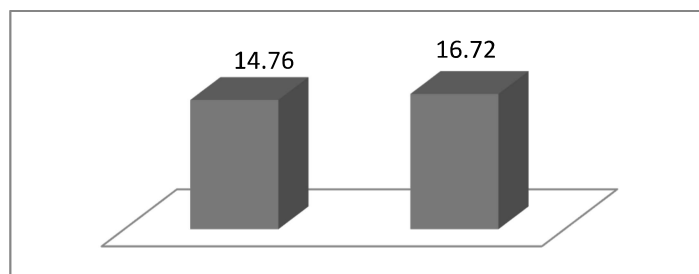
Descriptive Statistics of Experimental Group's Performances on Pre and Post-tests

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	14.7600	25	1.76257	.35251
	Post-test	16.7200	25	1.94765	.38953

There was a difference between mean scores of experimental group's performances on pre and post-tests (Pre-test=14.7600, Post-test=16.7200).

Figure 1

The Mean Scores of Experimental Group's Performances on Pre and Post-tests



In order to know if the difference between mean scores was statistically significant, Paired Sample *t*-test was run. Results indicate the mean scores of experimental group performances on pre and post-tests as shown.

Table 2

The Results of the Paired Sample t-test on Experimental Group's Performances on Pre and Post-tests

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
Pair					Lower	Upper			
1	Pre-test	-							
	Post-test	1.9600	1.71950	.34390	-2.66977	-1.25023	-5.699	.000	
		0							

The difference between mean scores was statistically significant, (sig<0.05). This result rejects the first research hypothesis that "unlimited time and access to dictionaries do not affect EFL learners' writing performance".

Addressing the Second Research Question

The second research question was: *Is there any difference between control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances?* In order to answer the second research question, the mean scores of control and experimental groups' performances on post-tests were contrasted. Results are provided in the descriptive statistics of control and experimental groups' performances on post-tests (Table 3).

Table 3

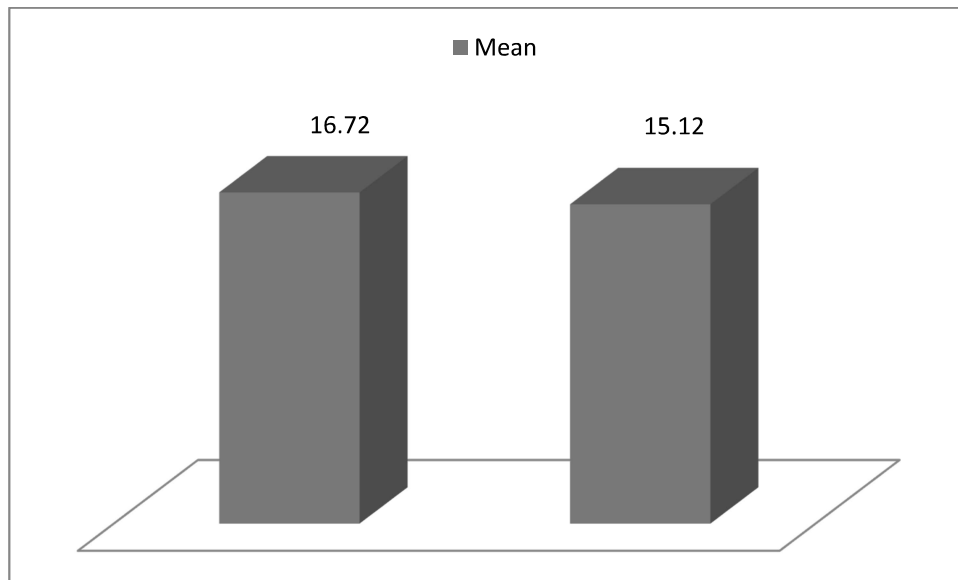
Descriptive Statistics of Control and Experimental Groups' Performances on Post-tests

	Group2	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing	Experimental	25	16.7200	1.94765	.38953
	Control	25	15.1200	1.66633	.33327

As indicated, there was a difference between mean scores of controls (mean=15.1200) and experimental groups' (16.7200) performances on post-tests. Figure 2 indicates the mean scores of controls and experimental groups' performances on post-tests.

Figure 2

The Mean Scores of Control and Experimental Groups' Performances on Post-tests



In order to know if the difference between mean scores was statistically significant or not, Independent Sample *t*-test was run (Table 4).

Table 4

The Results of the Independent Sample t-test on Control and Experimental Groups' Performances on Post-tests

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Writing	Equal variances assumed	1.777	.189	3.121	48	.003	1.60000	.51264	.56927	2.63073
	Equal variances not assumed			3.121	46.877	.003	1.60000	.51264	.56863	2.63137

As indicated, the difference between mean scores was statistically significant, ($\text{sig} < 0.05$). This result rejects the second research hypothesis that "There is not any difference between control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances".

Discussion

The first research hypothesis revealed that unlimited time affected EFL learners' writing performance. In contrast to previous studies, Caudery (1990) administered research in which 24 learners were divided into two 12 member teams to identify the influence of time constraints on their writings. Learners wrote two argumentative papers, in each case with a selection of two subjects. So, there were two situations, i.e., one paper was written in class in 40 minutes, and another began in class. Under the second condition, learners were granted one hour of classroom time and their activity was started in the class, but it was carried on and ended at home within two days. The paper topics were inversed for the two teams, i.e., the topics on which one team wrote in 40 minutes were the subjects on which another team wrote without any time pressure. Lastly, the findings showed that there was no proof that learners will write better without a time limitation. In other words, relationship between the teams' time-limited and unlimited time for writing offered no proof to affirm the correlation between the difference in personal learners' grades and the time variable.

Moreover, the finding is not in line with the Powers and Fowles's (1996) study. They investigated the diversity in examinee fulfilment on a 40-minute and 60-minute offered GRE writing exam. Three hundred prospective graduate learners performed writing two papers under each of the time restrictions. On a questionnaire filled in after writing the papers, 75 percent of participants expressed a 40-minute time allotment was enough, and 88 percent appreciated 60 minutes was enough. The diversity in the comprehension of time was statistically significant, particularly for learners who expressed they were slow or average test-takers. More time was equally useful to test-takers, who determined themselves as faster, average, or slower writers. Mean scores enhanced little with more time (mean enhancements were .06 and 1.0 for various prompts on a 1–6 measure with two readers). However, the respective achievement of fast, average, and slow test-takers and the meaning of exam grades did not alter substantially when more time was assigned.

The finding is in line with the Sr and Scott study (2017). Their pilot research investigated the impacts of time restrictions on the achievement of accounting learners taking a test in undergraduate accounting classes. The findings catered proof to accounting teachers that allowing learners more time to take accounting tests amends their scores.

Addressing the first research hypothesis it was also revealed that access to dictionaries affected EFL learners' writing performance. Various kinds of dictionaries have assisted language students find the meaning of unfamiliar vocabularies, directed them to make correct sentences, and equipped them with points on vocabulary use in the correct context (Takahashi, 2012). However, there have been different viewpoints among language instructors on whether or not dictionaries really help learning (Carduner, 2003).

The findings of the current study are not in line with Nesi and Meara's (2002) assertion that there was no important diversity in the correctness of sentences generated after conferring entries from LDOCE-2, COBUILD-1, and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD-4).

The findings are supported by the study of East (2006). East detected that the less competent, students appear to profit from the dictionaries in terms of lexical complexity and dictionary developed their language learning.

Addressing the second research hypothesis the results revealed that there is a difference between control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances.

In contrast to the previous studies, the finding is in line with Miller's (2006) study. In his research, four teams of college ESL learners took part in a session to develop their utilization of the English article system. Two of the teams utilized English students' dictionaries and two did not. The findings of the research showed that the learners who utilized the dictionaries performed with a slightly higher number of accurate replies in the given practices and reported a higher degree of satisfaction with the session than those who had not utilized dictionaries.

The finding is in line with the study of Fatt (2007). The research examined the influence of time on ESL writing achievement. The participants of the research were two teams of undergraduate tellers of English. To examine the influences of time on their writing achievement, the participants each produced a 45-minute article and a 30-minute article. These articles and the prewritten drafts form the fundamental body of the research. The examinations indicated that the whole article grades and three of the five component grades of articles produced in 45 minutes were significantly better than those produced in 30 minutes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study focused on the null hypotheses which assumed that unlimited time and access to dictionaries do not affect EFL learners' writing performance. There is not any difference between the control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances as well. As the results showed, unlimited time and access to dictionaries affected EFL learners' writing performance and improved it. Finally, there was a difference between control and experimental groups regarding their writing performances. Thus, the results of the study rejected the first and second hypotheses. Similar to our research, some of the research affirmed that unlimited time affects the writing performance of the students, and some others rejected this result and asserted the negative effect of unlimited time on the writing achievement of learners. Similarly, much of the previous research affirmed the positive influence access to dictionaries has on EFL learners' writing performance.

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