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# RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Role of Task Type in Enhancing Writing Fluency: A Study of Saudi Female University Students

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# **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the impact of task type on L2 writing fluency among 50 Saudi female university students. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research examines how narrative and argumentative tasks influence syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and writing speed. The findings reveal that narrative tasks are associated with higher syntactic complexity, while argumentative tasks promote greater lexical diversity. No significant difference was observed in writing speed between the two task types. These results highlight the importance of task selection in language instruction and suggest that a balanced approach, incorporating both task types, can enhance L2 writing fluency. The study contributes to the understanding of task-based instruction in EFL contexts and offers practical implications for curriculum design.

# **KEYWORDS**

Writing fluency, second language writing, task type, TBLT, EFL, syntactic complexity, writing speed.

# ARTICLE INFORMATION

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#### 1. Introduction

Writing fluency is a fundamental aspect of language proficiency, particularly in academic environments where the ability to express complex ideas clearly and coherently is essential (Hyland, 2003). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained prominence as an effective approach for developing writing skills, emphasizing the use of specific tasks to promote linguistic competence (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). However, the impact of different task types on writing fluency, especially in the context of female university students in Saudi Arabia, remains underexplored (Al-Ghamdi & Al-Shehri, 2016). The study is grounded in several theoretical frameworks, including Skehan's (1998) Cognitive Approach to Language Learning and Ellis's (2003) Task-Based Language Teaching framework. These theories suggest that different types of tasks can elicit varying levels of cognitive engagement, which in turn influences linguistic output. The present study builds on these foundations by exploring the specific impact of task types on writing fluency, considering factors such as syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and writing speed.

#### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Theoretical Background

The primary theories guiding this research include Skehan's (1998) Cognitive Approach to Language Learning and Ellis's (2003) Task-Based Language Teaching framework. Skehan's Cognitive Approach emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in language learning, particularly how learners allocate their attentional resources during task performance. According to this theory, different types of tasks require different levels of cognitive engagement, which can affect the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of language output (Skehan, 1998). This approach provides a basis for understanding how narrative and argumentative tasks might differentially influence writing fluency among learners. Ellis's Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) framework builds on the principles of communicative language teaching, advocating for the use of real-world tasks to promote meaningful language use. TBLT posits that tasks should be designed to elicit natural language use, encouraging learners to focus on both meaning and form. In this

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context, task type is crucial, as it can dictate the linguistic and cognitive demands placed on the learner, thereby influencing the development of writing fluency (Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2018).

Additionally, the study draws on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context in language development. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that learners can achieve higher levels of performance through guided interaction and task-based activities that are slightly beyond their current level of competence. This theory supports the use of varied task types in writing instruction, as they can provide opportunities for learners to extend their linguistic abilities with appropriate scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for exploring the impact of task type on writing fluency among Saudi female university students. By integrating cognitive, communicative, and sociocultural dimensions, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how task-based instruction can be optimized to enhance language learning outcomes.

## 2.2 L2 Writing Fluency Measures

L2 writing fluency has been explored in numerous studies, focusing on various indicators such as syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and writing speed. Nation (2009) defined writing fluency as the ability to produce language rapidly without undue hesitation, while Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) highlighted syntactic complexity, measured by the average length of Tunits and clauses per T-unit, as a key indicator of fluency. Lexical diversity, often assessed using the Type-Token Ratio (TTR), has also been identified as a crucial component of fluency, reflecting a writer's ability to use a varied and sophisticated vocabulary (Nation & Webb, 2011). Recent research by Wang (2022) and Kim (2021) has begun to explore this area, revealing that different tasks can lead to distinct outcomes in terms of syntactic complexity and lexical diversity. For instance, Wang's study on Chinese EFL learners found that narrative tasks encouraged greater syntactic complexity, while argumentative tasks promoted lexical diversity. Similarly, Kim's research on Korean university students highlighted the role of task type in shaping writing fluency, suggesting that narrative tasks may encourage more personal expression, whereas argumentative tasks demand more structured and logical use of language.

# 2.2.1 L2 Syntactic Complexity

L2 writing, syntactic complexity is often measured through various metrics, such as the length of clauses, the number of subordinate clauses, and the use of complex noun phrases (Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011). It reflects a learner's ability to produce grammatically complex sentences, which is an indicator of their overall language proficiency (Norris & Ortega, 2009). Studies on L2 syntactic complexity have shown that it is a significant predictor of writing quality. A study by Lu and Ai (2015) found that higher syntactic complexity is assoc iated with better writing scores among L2 learners. More recently, Bulté and Housen (2020) explored how different instructional contexts impact the development of syntactic complexity, concluding that explicit grammar instruction can significantly enhance L2 learners' syntactic complexity in writing.

#### 2.2.2 L2 Lexical Diversity

Lexical diversity refers to the range of vocabulary used in a text. It is an important measure of language proficiency, particularly in writing, where a more diverse vocabulary is associated with higher writing quality (Jarvis, 2013). Lexical diversity can be quantified using several indices, such as the Type-Token Ratio (TTR), which calculates the ratio of unique words (types) to the total number of words (tokens) (Malvern et al., 2004). Lexical diversity has been a focal point in research on L2 writing. Research by McCarthy and Jarvis (2010) highlighted that lexical diversity is not only a marker of vocabulary knowledge but also of the writer's ability to use language creatively and effectively. A recent study by Kim and Crossley (2021) demonstrated that higher lexical diversity is associated with better argumentative writing among L2 learners, particularly in terms of persuasiveness and coherence.

#### 2.2.3 L2 Writing Speed

Writing speed refers to the rate at which a writer can produce written text, often measured in words per minute (WPM). It is an important factor in timed writing tasks, where the ability to quickly generate ideas and translate them into coherent text is critical (Van Waes, Leijten, & Neuwirth, 2021). Writing speed can be influenced by various factors, including the writer's familiarity with the topic, their typing skills, and their proficiency in the language (Connelly, Dockrell, & Barnett, 2005). Writing speed has been studied extensively in both first and second language contexts. A study by Johnson et al. (2019) found that faster writing speed is correlated with higher writing quality, particularly in exams and other high-pressure situations. In L2 contexts, research by Van Weijen, Van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, and Sanders (2019) suggested that writing speed is a critical factor in academic success, as it affects the ability to complete timed tasks and the overall fluency of the writing produced.

# 2.3 Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Writing Fluency

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been extensively researched as an effective method for promoting language acquisition through authentic, meaningful tasks. According to Ellis (2018), TBLT encourages learners to engage in real-world communication, which is essential for developing various aspects of language proficiency, including writing fluency. Writing fluency, often defined

as the ability to produce written language quickly and effortlessly, is a crucial skill in academic and professional settings. TBLT's emphasis on meaningful interaction and communication has been shown to significantly impact learners' writing fluency by promoting natural language use and reducing cognitive load (Willis & Willis, 2007). While TBLT has been shown to enhance various aspects of language proficiency, the specific impact of different task types on writing fluency has been less thoroughly investigated. Recent studies have begun to address this gap by exploring how narrative and argumentative tasks influence writing outcomes.

## 2.3.1 Narrative and Argumentative Tasks in L2 Writing

Narrative tasks typically involve recounting a sequence of events or experiences, focusing on storytelling aspects, and are often personal or fictional. They are characterized by a clear structure with a beginning, middle, and end, and emphasize the chronological order of events (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Argumentative tasks, on the other hand, require the writer to present a claim or thesis and support it with evidence and reasoning. These tasks are more focused on persuading the reader by presenting logical arguments and often involve addressing counterarguments (Toulmin, 1958; Nippold & Ward-Lonergan, 2010). Recent research has compared the cognitive and linguistic demands of narrative and argumentative writing tasks. For instance, Crossley et al. (2021) found that argumentative tasks tend to require more complex syntactic structures and a higher degree of critical thinking, which can affect language learners differently depending on their proficiency levels. Meanwhile, Yang, Lu, and Weigle (2022) emphasized that narrative tasks are generally easier for language learners because they rely more on everyday language and less on abstract reasoning, making them more accessible to lower-proficiency learners.

These findings suggest that different task types can lead to distinct outcomes in writing fluency, with narrative tasks fostering syntactic complexity and argumentative tasks promoting lexical diversity. However, the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other populations, such as Saudi female students, remains unclear. In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language, and students often face unique challenges in developing writing fluency. Alharbi (2020) noted that Saudi students, particularly females, may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom and fewer opportunities for meaningful writing practice. Cultural and educational factors, such as gender norms and the emphasis on rote learning, may further hinder the development of writing fluency in this context.

# 2.4 Research Gap

Despite the extensive research on TBLT and writing fluency, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the specific impact of task type on writing fluency among Saudi female university students. Moreover, the existing research on writing fluency in the Saudi EFL context has generally focused on broader instructional strategies rather than the specific effects of task types. This gap is significant because understanding how different task types impact writing fluency could inform more effective instructional practices tailored to the needs of Saudi female students. The present study aims to address this gap by investigating how narrative and argumentative tasks influence writing fluency among Saudi female university students. By examining the specific outcomes related to syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and writing speed, this research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how task-based instruction can be optimized to enhance writing fluency in this unique educational context. The findings of this study could also have significant implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and educational policy in Saudi Arabia, as well as in other similar contexts.

#### 2.5 Research Questions:

- 1. How does Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) influence L2 writing fluency among female university students in Saudi Arabia?
- 2. What are the effects of different task types on the syntactic complexity and lexical diversity in theL2 writing of female university students?
- 3. How do narrative and argumentative tasks differ in their impact on the L2 writing fluency of second language learners in Saudi Arabia?
- 4. What role does writing speed play in the overall L2 writing proficiency of female university students engaged in TBLT?

# 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the impact of task type on L2 writing fluency among Saudi female university students. The participants were 50 undergraduate students majoring in English at a Saudi university. The study focused on two task types, narrative writing task and argumentative writing task. In the narrative task, participants were asked to write a short story based on a series of images provided. The images depicted a sequence of events such as a day in the life of a university student, starting from waking up, going to classes, interacting with friends, and ending the day with a reflection on the day's events. The task required participants to use past tense and include descriptions that provided context and emotional depth to the story. This task was chosen because narrative tasks are known to encourage the use of syntactically complex structures, such as subordinate clauses and descriptive language, which are essential for storytelling (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Wang, 2022).

In the argumentative task, participants were asked to write an essay on the topic "Should social media be restricted for teenagers?" They were required to take a position, either in favor or against, and support their argument with at least three points of reasoning. Additionally, participants needed to address potential counterarguments to their stance. This task was selected because argumentative tasks stimulate critical thinking and the use of diverse vocabulary, logical connectors, and complex sentence structures to persuade the reader (Toulmin, 1958; Kim, 2021).

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants were 50 undergraduate students. They were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring a representative sample Saudi female student. The participants' L2 is Arabic and L2 is English. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 22 years, with an average proficiency level of B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The selection of this process was designed to control for variations in language proficiency, thereby enhancing the reliability of the findings and ensuring that the data would be representative of individuals at this critical stage of language development

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, 50 participants completed both narrative and argumentative writing tasks. Each writing sample was timed, with participants given 30 minutes for each task. The writing samples were then analyzed for syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and writing speed (see table1) using manual analysis. Manual analysis offers a highly detailed and tailored approach to examining syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and writing speed, though it requires careful planning, consistency, and significant time investment.

L2 writing fluency Measures	Definitions	
1- Syntactic Complexity	Count the number of clauses per sentence to calculate the mean length of clause	
	(MLC), mean length of sentence (MLS), and the ratio of clauses to sentences.	
2-Lexical Diversity	Type-Token Ratio (TTR): the total number of words (tokens) and the number of	
	unique words (types) in the text.	
3-Writing Speed	divide the total number of words by the total time spent writing (words per minute).	

Table1. L2 writing fluency measures

In the second phase, semi-structured interviews (see appendix 1) were conducted with a subset of 50 participants. These interviews aimed to gather qualitative insights into the participants' perceptions of the tasks and their self-reported writing strategies. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to understand the impact of task types on writing fluency.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

L2 writing fluency measures (table1) were analyzed using SPSS software. The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes identified based on the participants' responses related to their experiences with narrative and argumentative tasks.

#### Step 1: Syntactic Complexity

The average length of T-units and the number of clauses per T-unit were calculated to measure syntactic complexity. The choice of these metrics was based on their widespread use in L2 writing research (Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011).

# Step 2: Lexical Diversity

Lexical diversity was assessed using the Type-Token Ratio (TTR), calculated through both manual counts and automated tools. TTR is a standard measure of lexical variety, providing insights into the richness of the participants' vocabulary (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2010).

# Step 3: Writing Speed

Writing speed was measured in words per minute (WPM), reflecting the participants' fluency under timed conditions. This measure is crucial in assessing the ability to produce coherent text within a limited timeframe (Van Waes et al., 2021).

#### Step 4: Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data from participant interviews were thematically analyzed to identify patterns and insights related to their experiences with the tasks. This involved coding the responses and identifying recurring themes.

#### Challenges and Solutions:

Several challenges were encountered during the analysis, including variations in participant engagement and differences in typing speed. These were addressed by normalizing the data and conducting additional checks to ensure consistency.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis revealed significant differences in writing fluency outcomes based on task type. The following table (2) summarizes the key findings:

Task Type	Syntactic Complexity (Mean Length of T-Unit)	Lexical Diversity (TTR)	Writing Speed (Words per Minute)
Narrative	15.4	0.62	12.8
Argumentative	12.7	0.68	13.2

As shown in Table 2, narrative tasks were associated with higher syntactic complexity, while argumentative tasks resulted in greater lexical diversity. Writing speed did not differ significantly between the two task types (Wang, 2022; Kim, 2021).

In terms of the qualitative data analysis, the thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key insights. Participants with higher proficiency levels reported finding argumentative tasks more challenging but rewarding, as they allowed for the use of more sophisticated vocabulary. On the other hand, participants with lower proficiency levels preferred narrative tasks, which they found easier to engage with due to the personal nature of the content. Additionally, participants with reflective cognitive styles expressed a preference for narrative tasks, which they felt allowed for more creativity and personal expression. In contrast, those with analytical cognitive styles favored argumentative tasks, which they perceived as more structured and aligned with their logical thinking patterns (Ellis, 2018; Willis & Willis, 2007).

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the impact of task type on writing fluency among Saudi female university students. The significant differences observed in syntactic complexity and lexical diversity based on task type underscore the importance of task selection in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998). The higher syntactic complexity associated with narrative tasks suggests that these tasks encourage students to use more complex sentence structures, likely due to the narrative's inherently descriptive nature. In contrast, the greater lexical diversity observed in argumentative tasks may be attributed to the need for precise and varied vocabulary to construct persuasive arguments (Wang, 2022; Kim, 2021). However, this study adds to the literature by focusing on Saudi female students, a population that has been underrepresented in existing research. The qualitative findings further highlight the role of individual learner characteristics, such as proficiency levels and cognitive styles, in shaping responses to different task types (Ellis, 2018). The implications of these findings are significant for educators and curriculum designers. By understanding the specific effects of task types on writing fluency, educators can tailor their instructional strategies to better meet the needs of their students. For instance, incorporating a balanced mix of narrative and argumentative tasks in the curriculum could help students develop both syntactic complexity and lexical diversity (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003). Further studies, such as those by Van Weijen et al. (2019) and Crossley et al. (2021), have explored how task design influences L2 writing development. These studies, along with the present research, underscore the importance of task selection in promoting balanced language development.

#### 5. Limitations and Future Research

The study was conducted in a single educational context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings .Future research could explore similar questions in different cultural and educational settings, as well as with larger and more diverse populations (Ellis, 2003). Additionally, this study focused on only two types of tasks. Future research could examine the impact of other task types, such as descriptive or expository writing, on writing fluency. Further exploration of the interaction between task type and other learner variables, such as motivation and anxiety, would also be valuable (Ellis, 2018; Willis & Willis, 2007).

# 6. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the differential impact of narrative and argumentative tasks on L2 writing fluency among 50 Saudi female university students. The findings suggest that narrative tasks are more effective in promoting syntactic complexity, likely due to the descriptive and structured nature of storytelling. Conversely, argumentative tasks are better suited for enhancing lexical diversity, as they require precise language to formulate persuasive arguments. These outcomes underscore the necessity of a balanced approach in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), where a mix of task types can foster comprehensive writing development. By tailoring task selection to the specific needs and proficiency levels of students, educators can better support the acquisition of advanced writing skills. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring other task types and examining the interplay between task type and learner characteristics such as motivation and cognitive style.

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#### Appendix 1

# Semi-structured interview questions

#### **Task Perception:**

How did you feel about the narrative and argumentative tasks? Were there any specific aspects of these tasks that you found particularly challenging or easy?

Which task did you prefer, and why?

# **Cognitive and Emotional Engagement:**

How did you approach the narrative task? What was your thought process while constructing the story?

What strategies did you use to develop your arguments in the argumentative task?

Did you feel more engaged with one task over the other? If so, why?

# **Writing Strategies:**

Can you describe any specific strategies you used to manage your time while completing the writing tasks?

How did you ensure that your writing was coherent and well-structured?

#### Language Use:

How did you decide on the vocabulary and sentence structures you used in each task?

Did you find yourself using different kinds of language in the narrative task compared to the argumentative task?

# **Reflections on Writing Fluency:**

How did you perceive your writing fluency during these tasks? Did you find that one task type allowed you to write more smoothly or quickly than the other?

How do you think these tasks have influenced your overall writing ability?

# **Task Difficulty and Improvement:**

Which aspects of the tasks did you find most difficult, and how did you overcome these challenges?

In what ways do you think practicing these types of tasks could help improve your writing fluency in the future?