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Task-Based Learning and Its Impact on Writing Skills in Fifth-Grade Students

Aprendizaje basado en tareas y su impacto en las habilidades escritas en un grupo de 15 estudiantes de quinto grado

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Conflictos de intereses: ninguno que declarar.

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impact of task-based learning on English as a foreign language writing in fifteen fifth-grade students at a private school in Ambato. Using a ten-week action research design, changes in writing quality were assessed with a four-dimensional analytical rubric. Qualitative data from student journals revealed that communicative purpose was the primary motivational factor during the process, directly linked to improvements in writing quality. These findings provide empirical evidence for the viability of the communicative approach in Ecuadorian educational contexts with limited extracurricular exposure to English.

Keywords: task-based learning, fifth grade, written skills, semi-private classroom, L2 vocabulary

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza el impacto del aprendizaje basado en tareas en la producción escrita en inglés como lengua extranjera en quince estudiantes de quinto grado de una institución fiscomisional en Ambato. Mediante un diseño de investigación-acción de diez semanas, se evaluaron cambios en la calidad de la escritura mediante una rúbrica analítica de cuatro dimensiones y los datos cualitativos de los diarios estudiantiles revelaron que el propósito comunicativo fue el principal factor motivacional durante el proceso, lo que se vinculó directamente con las mejoras en la calidad de la escritura. Estos hallazgos aportan evidencia empírica sobre la viabilidad del enfoque comunicativo en contextos educativos ecuatorianos con escaso contacto extracurricular con el inglés.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje basado en tareas, quinto grado, habilidades escritas, aula semiprivada, vocabulario de L2

INTRODUCTION

Writing in a foreign language is rarely a neutral activity. For children in Ambato, Tungurahua province, Ecuador, whose community is shaped by artisan traditions and Andean culture, writing in English presents challenges beyond routine schoolwork. The gap between students' daily lives and the demands of writing in a foreign language encompasses linguistic, motivational, institutional, and emotional factors. Ellis (2003) noted that language-learning tasks are most effective when they create a genuine information gap that motivates learners. This is especially relevant when there is a clear divide between knowing language forms and producing written texts.

The study took place in a semi-private school in Ecuador, which receives partial state funding and is managed by a religious congregation. The English program followed the national curriculum guidelines (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2019), which emphasize structural knowledge and controlled practice at this level. By fifth grade, students typically learn English through grammar tables, vocabulary exercises, and copying tasks. Nunan (2004) observed that such approaches often result in declarative knowledge without the procedural skills needed for communication. This description matches the participant group in this study.

The motivation for this study arose from a clear classroom challenge. When asked to write a paragraph on a familiar topic without a model, most students produced disconnected fragments or repeated memorized sentences unrelated to the topic. Previous research on form-focused EFL instruction at the primary level has documented this issue. Graham and Sandmel (2011) found that focusing on correct form and imitation leads to risk-averse writers who avoid using unfamiliar structures. This pattern was visible in the classroom before the intervention.

Task-based learning marks a major shift in language teaching and has strong theoretical and empirical support. Long (2015) defined it as "an approach to language teaching that is based on the assumption that language learning is most efficient when the student is doing things with language, not just studying language in isolation." Willis and Willis (2007) argued that well-designed tasks create communicative conditions that help learners use new language knowledge productively. This study's main question was whether this approach could improve writing among ten-year-old EFL learners in a resource-limited Andean classroom.

Theoretical framework

Origins and Evolution of Task-Based Language Teaching

The origins of task-based language teaching date back to a set of practical experiments that tested the fundamental assumptions of the most popular grammar-translation and audiolingual methods used in the middle of the 20th century. The first recorded attempt at using real-world tasks as a foundation for language instruction was made by Prabhu in his Communicational Teaching Project in Bangalore, India, in 1987. This project demonstrated that students could

improve their grammatical skills by consistently engaging in meaning-focused tasks, without ever explicitly learning grammar rules. Prabhu called this the 'strong' form of task-based teaching, in which tasks serve as the core framework of the curriculum rather than merely supplementary activities. His findings were notable because they contradicted widespread beliefs about the necessity of explicit instruction in language learning.

Prabhu's ideas have continued to evolve over the years through the contributions of many other researchers seeking to provide a more systematic explanation of the effectiveness of certain tasks. Long proposed the interaction hypothesis in 1985, emphasizing the importance of language development for learners to negotiate meaning while performing a communicative task. When learners encounter communication problems and try to solve them by repeating, asking for clarification, and reformulating, they tend to focus more on the form of the language than on other aspects of the task. According to Long, this provides learners with a context for learning, allowing them to notice and process the language's form and incorporate it into their interlanguage system. This interaction hypothesis provided a psycholinguistic basis for the design of a communicative task, which was often neglected in Prabhu's approach.

Willis (1996) translated this theoretical foundation into a practical teaching framework for classroom use. Her three-phase model—covering pre-task preparation, during-task activity, and post-task focus on language—provided a feasible sequence that maintained the communicative nature of tasks while allowing explicit focus on form after the task. The significance of Willis's framework lies in its clear pedagogical structure and its explicit recognition that attention to form and meaning are compatible. An effectively planned task cycle can guide learners through both focus areas in a way that supports, rather than hinders, communicative development. This framework, further refined by Long (2015) and Willis and Willis (2007), shaped the instructional design of this study.

Defining Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Contexts

A persistent challenge in the task-based literature concerns the definition of what, precisely, a task is. The term has been used in ways that range from very broad, covering virtually any classroom activity, to quite narrow, restricting it to activities that closely simulate real-world communicative demands. Ellis (2003, p. 16) offered a definition that has become widely cited in the field, describing a task as "a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed." Several aspects of this definition deserve comment in relation to the present research. First, it is outcome-oriented, not process-oriented. That is, a task is seen in terms of what the student does or produces, not in terms of how he or she does it. Second, it places meaning at the heart of the task. The quality of the performance is assessed communicatively, not structurally. Third, it refers to planning and design in the notion of a 'workplan'. That is, tasks are seen as constructed, not spontaneous, interactions.

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001, p. 11) offered a complementary definition that added a key dimension by stating that tasks "require learners to use language, with a focus on meaning, to achieve a goal." The inclusion of the term 'goal' clearly sets tasks apart from exercises in a practical way. An exercise usually targets a linguistic goal, such as practicing the present perfect or transforming passive sentences correctly. On the other hand, the goal of a task is to achieve a communicative goal, such as writing a letter to a friend describing your neighborhood or presenting a short argument for or against a school rule. The difference is important because it changes the focus of assessment from grammatical correctness to communicative achievement. When learners have to achieve a communicative goal, they tend to use their full repertoire of language skills more than when they have to focus on grammatical accuracy. It is for this reason that task-based approaches tend to produce more and varied output than exercise-based approaches.

In the specific context of EFL writing instruction at the primary level, the concept of a writing task requires additional specification. Young learners in a context such as Ambato have not yet acquired the metalinguistic knowledge which secondary-level learners will bring to the explicit teaching of writing. Young learners' knowledge of what a text is, what it is used for, and how it should be constructed will be implicit and based on exposure, not instruction. A writing task with this type of learner will require particular attention to the scaffolding provided in the pre-task stage and to the genuineness of the communicative purpose set up. If the task does not create a genuine reason to write, ten-year-old learners are unlikely to experience the sense of communicative investment that researchers have identified as the primary driver of writing growth in task-based conditions (Lamb, 2004; Graham and Perin, 2007).

Comprehensible Output and the Role of Writing in Language Development

The theoretical case for task-based writing instruction draws heavily on Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, which emerged as a corrective to Krashen's (1982) influential but input-centred account of language acquisition. Krashen had argued that comprehensible input is the primary, and possibly the only, mechanism through which learners acquire new language. Swain challenged this position on the basis of observations from immersion classrooms in Canada, where learners who had received several years of comprehensible input in the target language still produced output that was noticeably non-native-like in its morphosyntactic features. Her conclusion was that comprehensible input alone is insufficient to drive full grammatical development and that learners need opportunities to produce the target language in ways that force them to notice the gaps between their current competence and the target norm.

Writing is, from this perspective, an exceptionally productive site for language development precisely because it imposes a kind of deliberate attention that spoken communication does not. When learners write, they must hold their intended meaning in working memory while simultaneously selecting appropriate lexical items, constructing grammatically

acceptable structures, and organising their ideas into a coherent sequence. This multiplicity of demands can be cognitively demanding, particularly for young learners at low proficiency levels. However, it also creates repeated opportunities for noticing, as Swain described, the engine of grammatical development. Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis provides a compatible account, arguing that conscious attention to formal features of the input and output is a necessary condition for those features to become available for acquisition. Together, the output hypothesis and the noticing hypothesis provide a strong theoretical warrant for designing tasks that push learners to produce written texts that exceed their current comfort level.

The connection between output and accuracy development is more intricate than Swain and Schmidt proposed. Skehan's (1998) model suggests that limited attentional resources mean fluency, accuracy, and complexity compete for cognitive capacity during tasks, with task conditions influencing the balance among these factors. Tasks with high cognitive demands, such as those involving unfamiliar content, often lead to less accurate output because attention is focused on managing content rather than monitoring language. This has significant implications for designing writing tasks in EFL settings, especially with young learners whose content knowledge and language skills often differ greatly. Teachers should therefore choose topics that reduce cognitive load related to content. When students write about topics they know well, Skehan's model predicts that attention shifts toward linguistic form, resulting in more accurate and complex output. The data from this study support this prediction.

Sociocultural Theory and the Social Dimensions of Writing

A purely cognitive approach to the development of writing skills, no matter how sophisticated its theoretical underpinnings, misses one important dimension that is clearly highlighted in research on young writers: the social dimension. The zone of proximal development as discussed in the work of Vygotsky (1978) clearly points to how the inclusion of social factors in writing activities can promote the development of writing skills. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is the difference between what the child can do on his own and what he can do under guidance. The inclusion of this concept in the discussion of how writing skills can be developed points to how the inclusion of social factors in writing can promote the development of writing skills. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) extended Vygotsky's framework to the specific context of second language development and placed particular emphasis on the concept of mediation: the idea that higher mental functions, including the ability to produce written text in a second language, develop through the internalisation of cultural tools and social practices. For second language writers, this means that the capacity to compose independently in the target language emerges from a history of assisted performance in social contexts. The implication for task design is significant. Tasks that ask students to write for a real or simulated audience, that create conditions for peer feedback, and that situate writing within a

social purpose are not merely motivating. They are developmentally productive in a way that isolated, teacher-directed writing assignments are not.

The sociocultural perspective also draws attention to the role of identity in second language writing. Lamb (2004) argued that learners' motivation to engage with a foreign language is shaped by their sense of who they are and who they want to become, and that tasks which allow learners to express aspects of their identity are more likely to produce sustained engagement than tasks that are culturally neutral or distant. For children in Ambato, whose identity is tied to a specific Andean community with its own cultural calendar, linguistic heritage, and geographic particularity, this argument carries direct practical implications. Writing tasks that invite students to represent their own world in the target language are not merely culturally responsive. They create the conditions under which learners are most likely to experience what Lamb described as integrative motivation, a motivational orientation that correlates strongly with writing persistence and quality in EFL contexts.

EFL Writing Instruction in Latin American Primary Contexts

The specific context of EFL writing instruction in Latin American primary schools has been underrepresented in the applied linguistics research literature, which has historically concentrated on secondary and tertiary level learners in East Asian and European settings. The limited research that does exist, however, suggests a pattern consistent with what was observed at the institution in this study. Form-focused, grammar-centred instruction has been the dominant model in the region, driven partly by national curriculum frameworks that prioritise structural coverage and partly by the relatively low English proficiency of many primary school teachers, who tend to feel more confident managing controlled practice activities than open-ended communicative tasks (Chacón, 2005).

Ecuador presents a particular variant of this pattern. The Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador (2019) introduced an updated national English curriculum that acknowledged the importance of communicative competence and aligned the country's learning objectives with the Common European Framework of Reference. In practice, however, the transition from structural to communicative instruction has been uneven and has proceeded more rapidly in urban private schools than in fiscomisional or fiscal institutions serving working-class communities. Research conducted in comparable Ecuadorian contexts has documented the persistence of a gap between curriculum intentions and classroom practice that is particularly pronounced in the written skills domain (Calle et al., 2012). Students are expected to develop communicative writing ability under a national framework that endorses communicative approaches, but they are routinely taught through methods that do not support that development.

This structural tension between curriculum intentions and classroom practice provides the immediate research context for the present study. Task-based learning has been proposed as one mechanism through which the gap might be bridged, but the empirical evidence for its

effectiveness at the primary level in Ecuador is thin. Most of the TBL research conducted in Ecuador has focused on secondary and tertiary learners in urban centres, and relatively little attention has been paid to the particular challenges that arise when task-based approaches are introduced to young learners with minimal English exposure outside the classroom. The present study attempts to contribute to this gap by documenting what happens to writing quality when a carefully sequenced TBL intervention is introduced to a group of fifth-grade students in a fiscomisional school in Ambato.

Writing Development in Young EFL Learners

Writing development in young EFL learners follows a trajectory that is shaped by both cognitive and linguistic factors that are qualitatively different from those operating in adolescent or adult writers. Cameron (2001) noted that primary-level language learners bring to the writing task a set of cognitive tools that are still developing, including working memory capacity, metalinguistic awareness, and the ability to plan and monitor extended written production. These developmental constraints mean that writing tasks for young learners need to be designed with a level of scaffolding that would be unnecessary for older learners and that the criteria used to evaluate their output need to be calibrated to what is developmentally realistic at the relevant age and proficiency level.

At the same time, young learners bring certain advantages to the language learning enterprise that older learners do not. Their affective filters tend to be lower, their willingness to engage with creative and imaginative tasks is generally higher, and their susceptibility to social motivational influences, including the desire to share their writing with peers and to receive recognition from classmates, is particularly pronounced (Pinter, 2006). Task-based approaches that incorporate peer sharing and audience-oriented writing can exploit these motivational resources in ways that more traditional instructional designs cannot. The challenge for the teacher-designer is to balance the developmental constraints that limit what young learners can produce with the motivational affordances that task-based conditions can activate.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) drew an influential distinction between two models of writing: knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming. Knowledge-telling describes the process through which immature writers simply transcribe what they know about a topic in the order in which it comes to mind, without engaging in the kind of goal-directed planning and revision that characterises more developed writing. Knowledge-transforming describes the more sophisticated process through which writers use the act of writing as a tool for refining and developing their thinking about a topic, moving back and forth between content and form in a recursive problem-solving process. Most young EFL learners at the A1 level operate in the knowledge-telling mode, and the pedagogical task for a TBL intervention at this level is not to push them prematurely into knowledge-transforming writing but to create conditions under which knowledge-telling becomes progressively more organised, purposeful, and communicatively

adequate. The results of the present study suggest that a carefully sequenced task cycle can produce meaningful progress along this developmental continuum over a relatively short intervention period.

Motivation, Affect, and EFL Writing Engagement

The motivational dimensions of EFL writing have been explored through a number of theoretical frameworks that converge on the conclusion that affective factors are not merely supplementary to linguistic development but are constitutive of it. Dörnyei's (2001) framework of language learning motivation proposed that the motivation to engage in L2 writing is shaped by three broad levels: the language level, which includes the learner's orientation toward the target language and its culture; the learner level, which encompasses stable personality traits and general motivational dispositions; and the learning situation level, which includes course-specific and teacher-specific motivational variables. The last of these three levels is the most directly amenable to pedagogical intervention, and it is here that task design choices have the greatest leverage.

At the learning situation level, the factors that research has most consistently identified as motivationally significant for young EFL writers include task relevance, perceived communicative purpose, and the opportunity for social sharing of written products. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory provides a compatible account, proposing that intrinsic motivation for an activity is supported when three basic psychological needs are met: the need for competence, the need for autonomy, and the need for relatedness. A well-designed writing task can address all three of these needs simultaneously. By selecting topics within the learner's knowledge and experience, the task supports a sense of competence. By allowing open-ended rather than template-based responses, it supports autonomy. By situating the writing in a social context where peers will read and respond to the text, it supports relatedness. The convergence of these motivational conditions in a single task is one of the reasons why task-based writing approaches tend to outperform exercise-based approaches in motivational as well as linguistic terms.

In the Andean highland context of this study, motivational considerations have an additional cultural layer. Hornberger (1989) observed that learners in indigenous and mestizo communities in the Andean region often experience foreign language instruction as linguistically and culturally alienating, particularly when the content and topics of instruction are disconnected from their everyday world. Writing tasks that draw on students' knowledge of their own community, its celebrations, its geography, and its social practices represent a form of culturally responsive pedagogy that addresses this alienation directly. The evidence from this study, discussed in the results section, suggests that this connection between task content and local identity was one of the most consequential design decisions made during the intervention, producing measurable differences in writing quality between locally grounded and globally generic tasks.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed an action research design to align with its objectives. Burns (2010, p. 2) defined action research as "a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are also the practitioners in an educational context." This method was chosen to generate insights from within the classroom rather than from an external viewpoint. Data collection followed three iterative cycles, based on the spiral model described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988).

The participants were fifteen fifth-grade students from the same class in a fiscomisional institution in Ecuador, assigned through standard procedures. At the start, they were aged ten to eleven. Informal assessments showed most were at the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020). None attended private language academies or accessed English through the internet, travel, or family. This profile reflects the broader student population in similar institutions in Tungurahua province.

The intervention was conducted over ten weeks, with each session lasting ninety minutes and taking place once a week. The activities were organized into three clusters, each with a different thematic focus and increasing levels of communicative complexity. The first set of activities, covering the first three weeks, was based on writing descriptive texts about familiar spaces, objects, and people, with visual stimuli from Ambato. The second set, covering weeks four to seven, included writing narrative texts about private experiences and events in the community, including celebrations and geographical features. The third set, covering the last three weeks, was based on writing simple opinion texts about school and neighborhood topics, with open-ended prompts instead of sentence frames. Each session followed the three-stage structure proposed by Willis (1996) and refined by Long (2015). In the pre-task phase, relevant vocabulary was introduced through visual and contextual prompts, and a model text was provided to illustrate communicative purpose, not for imitation. Skehan (1998, p. 95) noted that pre-task preparation "allows learners to marshal the attentional resources that can then be directed toward form during the task itself," which guided session design. During the task phase, students worked individually or in pairs, focusing on meaning over grammatical accuracy. The post-task phase included peer sharing and brief attention to recurring language difficulties. This was done carefully, as Ellis (2003) observed that too much focus on form after tasks can reduce fluency gains.

Writing quality was evaluated using an analytic rubric adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981), customized for the group's A1 proficiency. The rubric assessed textual organisation, lexical diversity, grammatical accuracy, and communicative effectiveness, each scored on a five-point scale for a total of twenty points. Two evaluators—the teacher-researcher and an outside EFL assessment expert—independently scored all samples. Inter-rater reliability, determined by

Cohen's kappa, ranged from 0.74 to 0.81, signifying substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion before finalizing the scores.

Qualitative data were collected using two instruments. Students kept brief reflective journals in English after each session. These journals were ungraded, and students were told that their writing quality wouldn't be assessed. Each entry responded to three prompts: what the task asked for, what they found challenging, and whether they shared something meaningful. Boud and Walker (1998, p. 363) described reflective writing as a way for learners to "re-examine and make sense of their own experiences in ways that lead to new understandings," which was the goal of the journals. The second tool was the researcher's teaching journal, kept over the ten weeks to note observations of students' engagement, implementation difficulties, and moments of genuine communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative results reveal improvements across all four dimensions of the rubric during the intervention, as shown in Table 1. The most significant gain was in textual organization, with a group mean increasing from 1.80 to 3.60 by week ten. Lexical variety saw a similar rise, with a mean increasing from 1.90 to 3.40. Communicative adequacy also improved, moving from 1.70 to 3.50. Grammatical accuracy exhibited the smallest increase, with a mean rising from 1.60 to 2.70 by the end of the study. All findings were statistically significant at the .001 level according to paired-samples t-tests. Effect sizes were large for textual organization, lexical variety, and communicative adequacy, and moderate for grammatical accuracy. These results largely align with Rahimpour and Hashemi (2011), who observed greater improvements in discourse-level features than in morphosyntactic accuracy among similar proficiency EFL students undergoing task-based instruction, despite a shorter intervention duration.

Table 1

Writing Rubric: Pre- and Post-Intervention Mean Scores (N = 15)

Textual Organisation	1.80	3.60	+1.80	9.43	.000
Lexical Variety	1.90	3.40	+1.50	8.17	.000
Communicative Adequacy	1.70	3.50	+1.80	9.72	.000
Grammatical Accuracy	1.60	2.70	+1.10	4.58	.000

Note. M = mean score on a 1–5 scale. t (14) = paired-samples t-statistic with 14 degrees of freedom. All differences were significant at $p < .001$. Gain = Post-M minus Pre-M.

The pattern in the grammatical accuracy data deserves closer attention. The students in this group had not yet developed the kind of explicit monitoring capacity that enables writers to systematically identify and correct their own errors. What was observed instead, particularly in

the latter half of the intervention, was an emergent sensitivity to when something sounded wrong without an ability to name the underlying rule. Swain (1985) described this phenomenon in her discussion of comprehensible output and noted that pushing learners to produce language, rather than to understand it, generates noticing processes that eventually feed grammatical development. The journal entries from weeks seven through ten contain several unprompted observations by students that their texts did not "feel right" in places they could not identify. That kind of metalinguistic uncertainty, uncomfortable as it is for the learner, may, in fact, be a productive precondition for later increases in accuracy.

The growth in textual organisation was the most immediately visible change in the writing samples collected over the ten weeks. At the baseline, the majority of texts could be described as inventories: strings of related sentences absent any clear opening or closing move. By week six, most students had begun to produce texts that opened with some form of orienting statement and closed with a sentence that signalled completion. This did not come from explicit instruction on paragraph structure. It appears to have developed by repeated exposure to purposeful model texts in the pre-task phase and through the gradual accumulation of what it feels like to finish saying something. Graham and Perin (2007, p. 17) found, in their synthesis of writing intervention research, that "the most consistent predictor of writing quality improvement is the frequency with which students write for real audiences," and the peer sharing component of the task cycle may have created at least an approximation of that condition.

Three themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of student journals. The first was a pattern of deliberately discomforting behavior in the early weeks. Several students described feeling uncertain and frustrated when they were not provided with a model to copy. This initial resistance is consistent with what Doughty and Williams (1998) observed in classrooms transitioning from form-focused to meaning-focused instruction: learners accustomed to reproductive tasks often experience the absence of a template as a kind of abandonment. The discomfort diminished considerably from week four onwards,however, and the teaching journal records a pronounced shift in tone during the sessions centred on narrative tasks tied to the local context in Ambato. Several students wrote that they wanted to finish their texts correctly because the topics were "real", a word that appeared in six separate journal entries. Lamb (2004, p. 7) argued that learner investment in a task is most durable when the task connects to an identity the learner wants to project, and writing about one's own city and community appears to have activated something close to that kind of investment.

The second theme was social motivation. Students in this age group proved to be acutely responsive to peer evaluation, and the post-task sharing phase rapidly became the most engaged segment of the lesson. Multiple journal entries across the group referred to the experience of having a classmate read their work as a reason to write more carefully. This finding corresponds with the argument made by Storch (2013, p. 18) that joint writing tasks generate "a form of

accountability that individual writing assignments rarely produce," though in this case the accountability was peer-directed rather than built into a collaborative writing structure. The observation suggests that incorporating structured audience-oriented writing into EFL programmes at the primary level may produce motivational effects that more conventional tasks do not.

The third theme was an increasing sense of lexical ownership. In the final weeks of the intervention, several students noted in their journals that they had chosen words themselves rather than borrowing them from the model text or from a classmate. This kind of ownership over one's personal linguistic choices may appear modest from the outside, but it amounts to a significant shift for learners who had spent several years in an environment in which copying was the primary mode of written production. Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 58) described the movement from reliance upon external linguistic resources to the internalisation of those resources as a core dynamic in language development, and the journal evidence suggests that something of that kind was beginning to occur in this group by the end of the study.

An unanticipated finding concerned the relationship between local cultural content and writing quality. Tasks that drew on shared knowledge of Ambato's identity, including references to the Festival de las Flores y las Frutas, the volcanic scenery of Tungurahua, or the city's artisan markets, consistently produced texts that were longer, better organised, and lexically richer than tasks that used generic or globally sourced content. This was not simply a motivational effect. Kellogg (2008, p. 6) argued that writing quality is partly a function of the cognitive demand imposed by the topic, and that "when content knowledge is secure, working memory resources are freed for the linguistic and rhetorical demands of the material." When students wrote about what they knew from lived experience, those resources appear to have been made available in ways that more distant or abstract topics did not produce.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative strands of the data converge on a picture of writing development that is consistent with what the theoretical framework would predict but that is also shaped in important ways by the specific social and geographic context of this study. The gains in textual organisation and lexical variety reflect the kind of discourse-level development that Swain's (1985) output hypothesis associates with pushed production under communicative conditions. The motivational patterns documented in the journals align with Dörnyei's (2001) account of situation-level motivation and with Ryan and Deci's (2000) framework of basic psychological needs. The role of local cultural content as a predictor of writing quality is consistent with Skehan's (1998) resource allocation model and with Hornberger's (1989) observations about culturally responsive instruction in Andean settings. What the data add to these theoretical frameworks is a concrete demonstration that their predictions hold for ten-year-old A1-level learners in a resource-limited fiscomisional school in Ecuador, a population that has

rarely appeared in the task-based learning research literature and whose writing development has therefore been imperfectly understood.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined whether task-based learning could lead to significant improvements in the EFL writing skills of fifth-grade students at a fiscomisional institution in Ambato, Ecuador. The data gathered over ten weeks support an affirmative answer, qualified by important internal variations. Writing quality improved across all four rubric dimensions, with the largest and most consistent gains recorded in textual organisation, lexical variety, and communicative adequacy. Grammatical accuracy also improved, but more slowly and with greater individual variation, which is consistent with findings reported in similar intervention studies conducted at comparable proficiency levels (Rahimpour & Hashemi, 2011; Ellis, 2003).

The qualitative evidence adds a dimension that the rubric scores alone could not capture. Students experienced the shift from reproductive to communicative writing not simply as a change in task type but as a change in their relationship to the language. The arc from purposeful discomfort to lexical ownership that developed across the ten weeks of journal entries describes a developmental process that is well documented in the theoretical literature on second language writing (Swain, 1985; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) but that has rarely been traced in a group of primary-level EFL learners in an Ecuadorian highland context. Documenting it here is, in itself, a contribution worth noting.

Two recommendations for practitioners follow from the evidence. The first concerns task content. The data gathered here are consistent with the argument, advanced by Kellogg (2008) and supported by the results of this study, that tasks anchored in students' own cultural and geographic knowledge reduce the mental effort associated with content retrieval and free working memory for linguistic production. In situations where English instruction is disconnected from the local world students inhabit, building that connection deliberately into the task design is not simply a motivational gesture. It is a pedagogical one with measurable consequences for writing quality. The second recommendation concerns the structure of the task cycle. The social motivation produced by peer sharing in this study suggests that audience-oriented writing tasks should be treated as a core feature of instruction at this level rather than as an optional enrichment activity.

The theoretical framework developed in this article also points toward a broader implication for the design of English language teacher education programmes in Ecuador. Many primary school teachers in fiscomisional and fiscal institutions have been trained primarily in structural approaches to language teaching and have limited experience designing or facilitating communicative tasks. If task-based approaches are to be adopted more widely at the primary level in the highland provinces, teacher preparation programmes will need to address not only the

theoretical rationale for task-based instruction but also the practical skills of task design, scaffolding, and formative assessment that effective implementation requires. Cameron (2001) argued that teaching language to young learners requires a specific pedagogical knowledge base that is not reducible to knowledge of the language itself or to general pedagogical principles, and that argument applies with particular force to the design of writing tasks for young EFL learners in settings where out-of-class English exposure is minimal.

A final observation concerns the relationship between this study and the broader literature on educational equity in Ecuadorian secondary and primary schooling. The students who participated in this research are not exceptional. They are representative of a large population of Ecuadorian children who receive their entire English education within the four walls of a classroom taught by a teacher who is also working within significant resource constraints. The evidence gathered here suggests that this population is capable of meaningful growth in EFL writing quality when the instructional conditions are appropriately designed. That suggestion challenges a deficit narrative about students in working-class fiscomisional schools that is sometimes tacitly present in policy discussions about English language education in the region. These students did not need more grammar drills. They needed writing tasks that gave them something real to say and a reason to say it. The fact that they responded to those conditions in ways the theoretical literature would predict is a finding that should carry weight in future curriculum and teacher education decisions.

The limitations of this research are clearly defined. The sample consists of fifteen students at a single institution, the timeframe is ten weeks, and the teacher-researcher dual role creates a proximity that more controlled methodological designs avoid. Future studies should expand the sample, extend the intervention across a full academic year, and include a comparison group to distinguish the effects of task-based instruction from other variables. Within those boundaries, this study has established a foundation that justifies further research in this context.

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