Exploring the Effectiveness of Task Based Language Teaching In the Improvement of Descriptive Writing at Graduate Level

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Abstract: This is an experimental study based on exploring the effectiveness of task based language teaching (TBLT) in improving graduate students' descriptive writing as well as their perception of task based language teaching. The accessible population taken in this study is 410 students enrolled in Graduation at Khawja Fareed Govt. Post Graduate College Rahim Yar Khan. 60 male students have been administered a TOEFL structure test to bring homogeneity. They have been divided into two equal groups randomly. Thus two groups were formed one the treatment group and the other control one. Experimental and control class data were collected through written tests and questionnaires. Written pre and post tests were administered to both classes. Questionnaires were given to the students in experimental group after each of 12 treatment tasks. Data from written pre and post-test and questionnaires were analysed quantitatively. Percentage analysis was run to observe improvement between the groups. Test results revealed highly significant difference in favour of the treatment group. The study also demonstrated treatment groups' general perception of task based language teaching positively. Findings of this study are inspiring for the teachers to adopt task based language teaching to improve students' descriptive writing.
Keywords: Task; Task-based language teaching; Phases of task; Descriptive writing.

1. Introduction

Task based language teaching (TBLT) and learning has become enormously interesting in the present age (Ellis, 2000). It has become interesting for the teachers, scholars, researchers as well as learners. The reason is "task' is a construct of equal importance taken by researchers and teachers of second language acquisition.

Task based language teaching is a modern methodology of teaching foreign language. In philosophy and results it is opposite to the traditional methods of teaching language. This method aims to improve the functional use of communicative language. It provides a free environment to the learner of a language. Language is learnt by the learner without any external pressure because in the old methods of teaching language, the teacher is authority as he controls the whole environment but in this approach he is facilitator. So it is a learner centred approach. He chooses such forms of target language as help him to achieve the communicative goal (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996).

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is the product of "Bangalore Project" that was started in 80's. The project was started by Prabhu in India. Prabhu emphasized on competence and communication. By competence, he means 'grammatical competence' while communication refers to 'conveying meaning' (Sanches, 2004). Though a short term project, it instigated language scholars, ignited debates and enlarged its scope. Now, there are various versions of TBLT. But the term task is the dominant concept in all the various versions of TBLT. The term task has been defined variously by different scholars and researches. In the second language learning, a task is taken to be an activity that is undertaken by the learners to achieve some specific goal

Tasks provide learners a purpose to use the target language. During this purposive learning, students do not focus the grammatical forms of the target language; they enjoy a free environment where they are free to use the target language with its specific needs to accomplish the task. The teacher encourages the use of the language without immediate rectification. He facilitates and observes the process of learning. Skehan (1998)proposes that task should have relationship to the real world in order to promote meaning focused learning and to make the learning process authentic. Nunan proposes authentic tasks and pedagogical tasks. Pedagogical tasks are similar to authentic ones but their instructional patterns are not similar to that that happens in the real world. (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1998); Lee (2000); Ellis (2003).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of task-based language teaching to improve the learners' descriptive writing skill at graduate level in public and private sector colleges in the district Rahim Yar Khan of Punjab. After completing 14 years education and studying English language as a compulsory subject, many of the learners

complain about their lack of spoken as well as writing competencies. The poor teaching methodology along with other factors seems to be responsible for this situation. The task based language teaching aims to improve the situation so that the learners may become successful professionals wherever writing performance is required.

1.2. Research Questions
1. How effective is the use of task based teaching in improving students' descriptive writing skill?
2. What is the perception of students at graduate level about task based language teaching?

2. Literature Review

There is enough research literature that supports that improvement of oral skill with the help of tasks. But there is a little research on the use of tasks to improve descriptive writing skill. The present study explores the use of tasks or TBLT to improve the learner's descriptive writing skill.

Ellis (2003) defines task in the following manner: "A task is a work plan 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. For Nunan (2004) pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning.

What, Nunan emphasises, is meaning rather than form. In fact, further research in this context shows that both form and meaning are important for learning language because after all, we need form to learn language. Prabhu (1987) gives the following definition of task: "An activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process is regarded as task" Why tasks are used in teaching language. Tasks are pivotal elements in task based language teaching. They facilitate context to learners to activate acquisition process (Shehadeh, 2005). Thus TBLT is based on language learning theory rather than a theory of language structure.

"A task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language" (Branden, 2006). 'Task' according to Murat and Sibel (2011) has some goal. It consists of communicative use of language. Willis and Willis (2007) offered six dimensions of task. They report that tasks have some common characteristics. When learners involve in a task, they focus on 'exchanging and understanding' meaning, instead of emphasis on form or forms or patterns. Siros (2010) defines "tasks as classroom undertakings that are intended to result in pragmatic language use."

The interesting point is TBLT starts with focus on meaning. The learner is encouraged to use language neglecting some inaccuracies of form which, in fact, incidentally is emphasized latter on. TBLT is different from CLT because it believes in the study of form which brings accuracy. During task, students are encouraged to focus on meaning. However, at the end of sequence, they pay attention to forms. It will give them chance to get answer of all the possible queries and deficiencies of knowledge. Perviz and Ali (2009), report their study about the effectiveness of TBLT on Iranian students for the enhancement of their narrative and expository writing. Writing is the major problem in Iran because English writing is instructed through traditional approaches. 173 Junior and senior students were selected through TOEFL test to bring homogeneity. After pre-test scrutiny, 120 students were selected and randomly divided into four groups, two control groups and two experimental groups. The first control group was taught narrative writing but other control group was taught expository writing traditionally. The researcher taught other two groups G3 and G4 through TBLT. The results of TBLT method indicated that students in experimental group outperformed the students of control group.

Nunan (1991) presents five features of TBLT.
- Learning to converse in the target language through interaction is focused.
- Authentic material is brought into the learning situation.
- The learners are given opportunities to emphasis not only on language but also the learning process.
- It boosts up learner's personal experiences in classroom to learn language.
- It provides a close relation between the world of classroom and outside world.

Strictly speaking TBLT can be adopted and used in Hong Kong. It is usable in its weak version which involves first traditional way of introducing topic and discussing instead of schema option. Then students could be involved in tasks according to Carless (2007) research. It would not be out of place to distinguish between TBLT and TSLL, (Task Supported Language Learning).

TBLT is not only helpful in preparing learners to use language in real life but is also helpful to prepare students for their examination as well. Nowadays many exams include communication as a major element to test students' skills in using language. Some tests or exams include fill in the blanks, sentence completion and multiple choice questions in order to test learners' competency in the use of form. So such students must have practice of handling such forms.

Siros (2010) states that the most important feature of TBLT is that it moves learners from fluency to accuracy rather than from accuracy to fluency. He rightly says that at the stage known as strategic planning, it must be made clear whether the focus will be on form or content. Skehan (1998) also strengthens this view by saying that learners should be aware of what they will focus on-accuracy-fluency or complexity.

Zubeyde (2012) highlights the importance of planning, of line or on line' in TBLT. Do the learners produce more accurate oral or written language with the help of planning? Sixty students were chosen and data was collected in a Turkish EFL educational setting. The results of the study showed that planning during tasks produced more accurate language. The accuracy was judged in terms of error free clause, correct use of verb forms, use of plurals, articles and vocabulary. Needs analysis is important in TBLT as put by Ahmadniay (2014). Needs analysis consists of five stages "Deficiency analysis, target situation analysis, strategy analysis, means analysis, language audit".

2.1. Descriptive writing

Descriptive writing means the clear description of places, objects, people and events using apt details. An effective description will have enough and varied illustration of details to communicate a sense of the subject being described. Details used are usually sensory and selected to describe what the writer sees, smells, touches, tastes and hears. Descriptive writing is usually used in poetry, essay, fiction, nonfiction, reports and so on (Spencer, 2005). By describing an event, person, place or thing, the writer constructs a clear picture in the reader's mind. Descriptive writing is that area of writing which develops a picture with the help of sensory words, phrases and figurative language such as simile, metaphor and the sound words. When we come across the term descriptive writing, we think of fanciful poetry and stories that take us in forests and beautiful panorama or the passages in which people are busy in doing various activities that make them believable (McCarthy, 1998).

3. Data Collection Tools

3.1. Test

Test has been the first tool used for collection of data. Both pre-test and post-test were administered to the treatment as well as control group. A general structure test was administered to bring homogeneity among the learners. Pre-test was administered to both groups before the commencement of treatment. After the treatment post test was administered to both groups. The researcher himself prepared the question papers. Split half method was used to maintain similarity between pre- test and post test questions. The scripts of the participants in both groups were marked by the researcher himself and one other ratter. The test was descriptive in nature carrying 20 marks. The scripts were examined in the light of writing rubrics.

3.2. Questionnaire

In order to answer the second research question 'the perception of the learners in the use of task based language teaching' a perception questionnaire has been administered to the learners in the treatment group after each 12 tasks. This questionnaire aimed to judge the learners' understanding of task based language teaching by raising various issues like whether the tasks are helpful or not in improving descriptive writing skill, whether they arose curiosity or not, whether they are interesting or not, are they fun, whether students feel free in describing through tasks or not. The questionnaire was partially adapted from Kasap (2005) and modified according to the need. The questionnaire consisted of a 5 –point Likert scale. The participants were asked to choose from among 5 responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

3.3. Validity and Reliability of Tools

The questionnaire developed by Webster, Trevino and Ryan (cited in (Kasap (2005)) was partially modified. It consisted of a 5 –point Likert scale. The participants were asked to choose from among 5 responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The second tool, test was developed and applied by the researcher himself after piloting it on the same population at two different occasions.

4. Methodology

This paper aims at investigating the effectiveness of task based language teaching (TBLT) to improve graduate level students' descriptive writing. The study aims to answer the following question.
- How much effective is the use of TBLT in improving descriptive writing skill of students at graduate level in the district Rahim Yar Khan?
- What are learners' perceptions of TBLT?

The study is based on quantitative research design that is "a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship between variables".

The pre and post tests and questionnaire have been used as data collection tools. Before the start of treatment, a structure test adapted from TOEFL was run to bring homogeneity among the participants. The participants were administered pre-test and post-test prepared by the researcher himself. In preparing test a half split method was used. The treatment group was taught through TBLT. Data was analysed by percentage analysis. To examine participants' perception of TBLT a closed ended questionnaire was distributed among the treatment group at the end of each task.

4.1. Research Population

Total Population taken in this study for present research is 6410 in the district Rahim Yar Khan including private and public sector colleges namely, Nicass college Khan pur, Khawja fareed Govt post graduate college

Rahim Yar Khan, Govt post Graduate college for women Rahim Yar Khan, Alpine college Khan Pur, Nicaas College Rahim Yar Khan, Nice college Rahim Yar Khan, MTB college Rahim Yar Khan and Superior college Rahim Yar Khan.

4.2. Research Sampling & Size

The accessible population taken in this study is 410 students enrolled in Graduation at Khawja Fareed Govt Post Graduate College Rahim Yar Khan. 60 male students have been administered a TOEFL structure test to bring homogeneity. They have been divided into two equal groups randomly. Thus two groups were formed one the treatment group and the other control one.

4.3. Participants in the Study

Table-1.

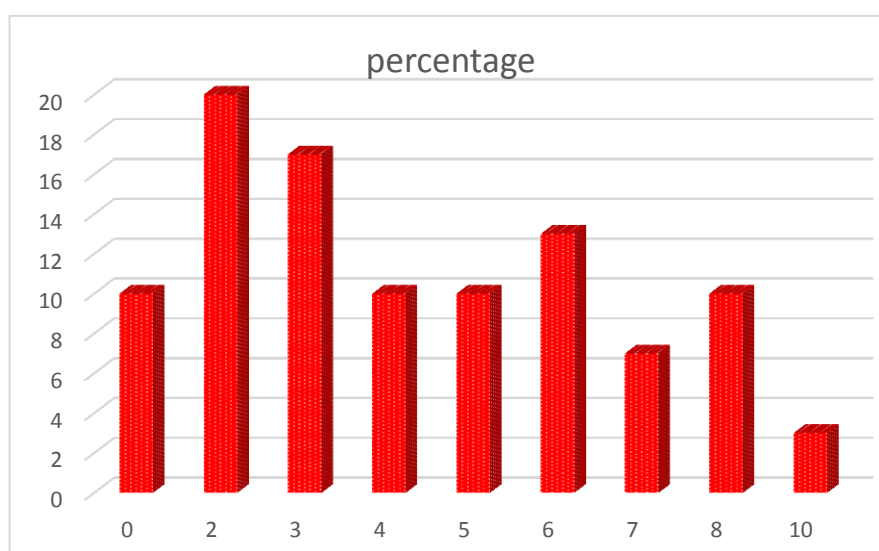| Participants	Number
Ratter	1
Teacher	1
Students in the treatment group	30
Students in the control group	30

4.4. Data Analysis

Percentage has been calculated to analyse the data collected through pre and post treatment test by using statistical package for social sciences 20 (SPSS). The focus of statistical analysis was to get the answer of the first research question, how effective is the use of task based language teaching in improving the descriptive writing skill of the students. In order to answer the second research question that is, what is the perception of students in the treatment group about task based language teaching.

4.5. Pre-post Experimental Analysis

Pre experimental analysis show that the lowest marks (zero) were achieved by 10% of the participants, whereas the highest marks(10) were achieved by 3% of the participants. Two marks were scored by 20 % of the participants. 3 marks were achieved by 17% of the students. 10% participants scored 4 marks whereas 5 marks were achieved by 10% of the participants. Six participants achieved 13% whereas 7% participants scored 7 marks. The second highest achievement was 8 marks by 10% of the participants

Table-2.

pre experimental	percentage
0	10
2	20
3	17
4	10
5	10
6	13
7	7
8	10
10	3

In post experimental analysis the results were in favour of the treatment group that is teaching of descriptive writing through task based language teaching. In the post treatment the highest marks 12 were scored by 7% of the participants. The second highest achievement is 10 marks by 20% of the participants. The lowest scores in the post treatment are four achieved by 3% of the participating population whereas the lowest marks in pre- treatment group were zero achieved by 10 % of the participants. Thirteen per cent of the participants achieved five marks whereas 17% participants scored six marks. Seven marks were achieved by 10% of the participants. Eight marks were achieved by 10% of the participants whereas 9 marks were achieved by 17% of the treatment group.

Table-3

post experimental	percentage
4	3
5	13
6	17
7	10
8	13
9	17
10	20
12	7
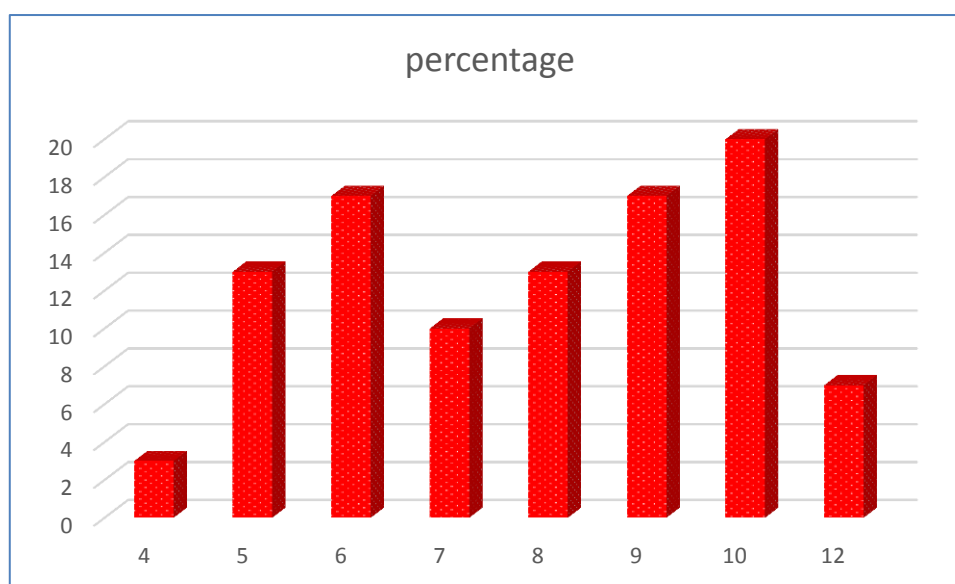
4.6. Pre control & Post Control Analysis

Pre-post control analysis show that there is development in descriptive writing skill of the students but it is not as significant as it is in the treatment group. In the pre control group the lowest marks are zero scored by 7% of the population whereas the highest marks are eight achieved by 10% of the students in the control group. The second highest achievement is seven marks by 10% population of the control group. Two marks are achieved by 20% of the participants. Four marks were achieved by 13% of the participants. Five marks were achieved by 27% of the control group students. Six marks were achieved by 13% of the control group participants. In post control analysis the highest score nine is achieved by 13% of the population in control group. The lowest marks two have been achieved by 10% of the participants in control group. Three marks have been achieved by 20% participants whereas eight marks have been achieved by 14% of the participants. Four, five and six marks have been achieved by 10%, 16% and 17% of the participants respectively in the control group.

Table-4

pre control	percentage
0	7
2	20
4	13
5	27
6	13
7	10
8	10

percntage
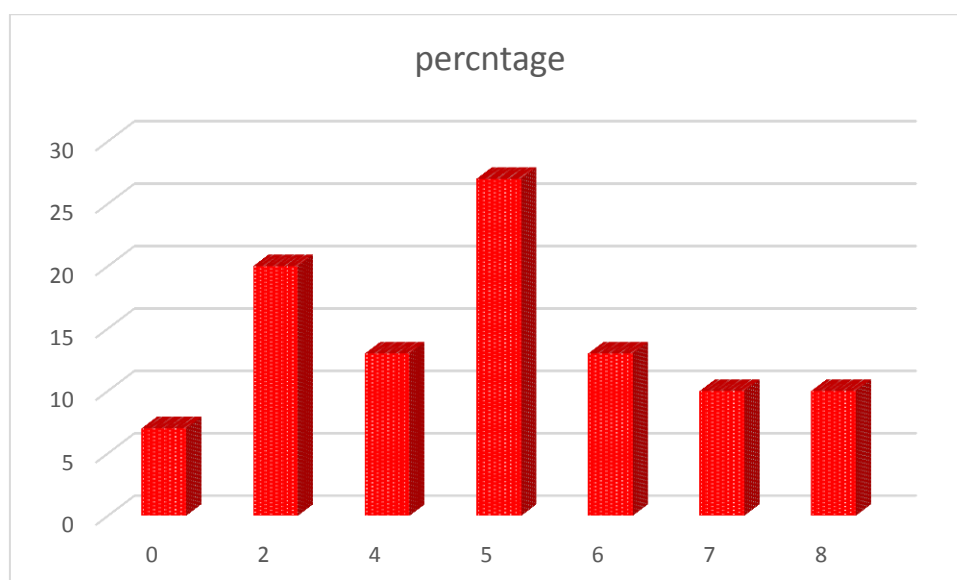
Table-5

post control	percentage
2	10
3	20
4	10
5	16
6	17
8	14
9	13

percentage
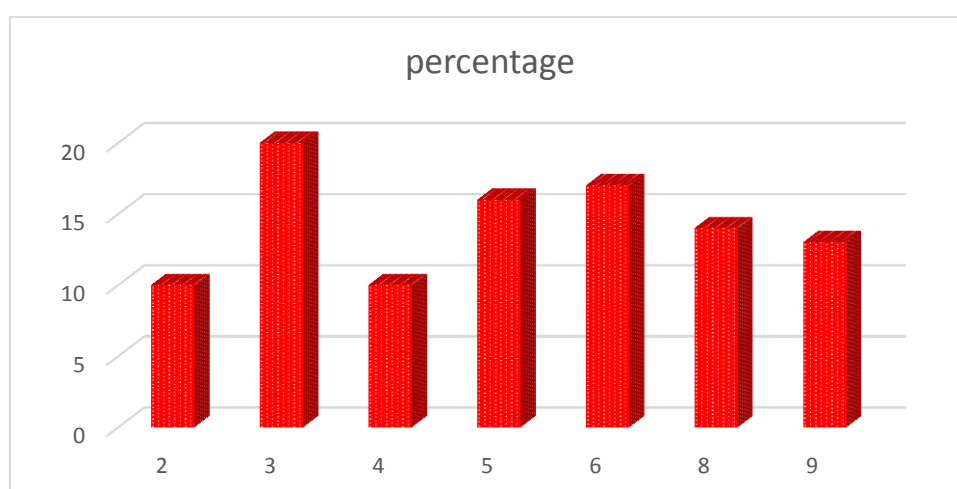
Answering the second research Question: what is the perception of students about task based language teaching?

The study also answers the second research question namely what is the perception of students about task based language teaching. For this purpose a questionnaire was distributed among the participants in the treatment group. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items related to the task based language teaching in general and descriptive writing in particular. The questionnaire was handed over to the participants after each task they completed. The questionnaire was meant to judge their understanding of TBLT. It also judged their perception of TBLT whether it was capable of improving descriptive writing of the participants or not? It was a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire. The students were asked to tick one of the five options namely strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree and don't know. The graph indicates students' responses. Maximum students responded in favour of agree, the second weightage was given to strongly agree. Some students showed ignorance in their response to various questions in the questionnaire. Some students disagreed and some strongly disagreed. Some students also favoured the neutral answer (don't know). The answers to some discrete items are worth mentioning. For example, almost all the participants answered positively to item no 14 in the questionnaire (TBLT provides relaxed atmosphere to learn language) because in this learning. Another discrete item which was responded negatively by almost all the participants is, for example item no 9 (the task was boring for me). The reason is TBLT provides fun like activities.

The participants were engaged in groups. They were free to exchange their ideas during group discussion session. They could talk freely even to their teacher. Item no 4(the task was enjoyable) was another item that was answered positively by almost all the participants. All the tasks were well planned and structured into three parts namely pre task, during task and post task.Item no 6 (the task helped me in learning) was responded positively. TBLT definitely helps students in learning language because it is based on students' welfare. It concentrates on using language instead of learning how to use language.

Students' perception of Task based language teaching
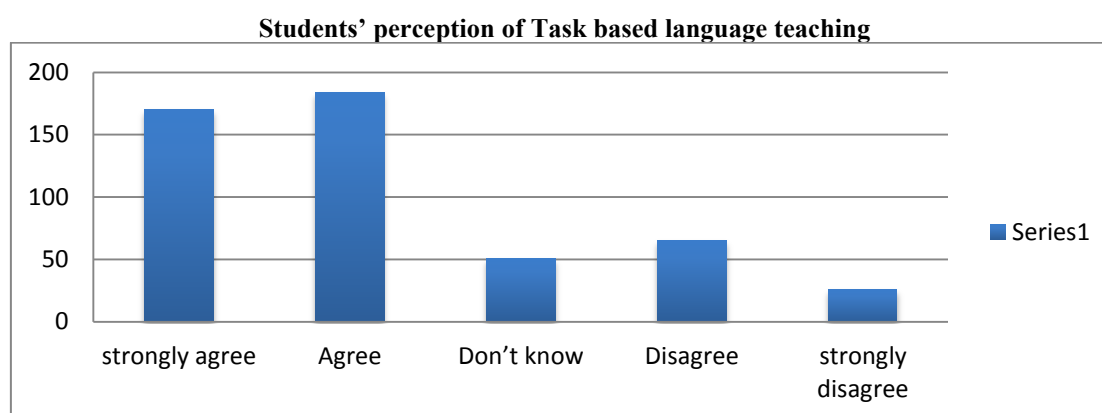
5. Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study are as follows. Pre-post experimental and pre-post control comparison show that there is improvement in descriptive writing of the participants in experimental as well as control group but the students in the treatment group have improved at a significant level. Pre experimental analysis show that the lowest marks (zero) were achieved by 10% of the participants, whereas the highest marks(10) were achieved by 3% of the participants. In the post treatment the highest marks 12 were scored by 7% of the participants. The second highest achievement is 10 marks by 20% of the participants. The lowest scores in the post treatment are four achieved by 3% of the participating population. In the pre control group the lowest marks are zero scored by 7% of the population whereas the highest marks are eight achieved by 10% of the students in the control group. In post control analysis the highest score nine is achieved by 13% of the population in control group. The lowest marks 2 have been achieved by 10% of the participants in control group. The analyses are in favour of the treatment group because the participants were taught by task based language teaching, a learner centred approach. The students are provided free atmosphere in TBLT whereas in traditional pedagogy they are not free to express what they feel. They are always under the control of pedagogue. There is improvement in descriptive writing of students when they appear in the post test however; their results are not comparable to the treatment group. On the whole the post results of both control and treatment group show a large difference.

The treatment group produced better results of course because of teaching methodology, task based language teaching, which was the most important factor to improve the participants' descriptive writing skill. It was first time the participants enjoyed themselves with such a relaxed and interesting teaching environment where students were free to discuss and exchange ideas. The teacher served as monitor, guide and facilitator. He did not act as commander who always controls the classroom environment. The participants were wholly free from any pressure, anxiety or psycho or socio factors that hinder free learning. The second research question was put to analyse the perception of students about TBLT. Questionnaire as an instrument was used to collect data. It consisted of twenty questions that were related to TBLT in general and descriptive writing in particular. It was a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire. The students were asked to tick one of the five options namely strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree and don't know. The perception questionnaire was delivered to the students of the experimental group at the end of every task. The graph indicates students' response. Maximum students responded in favour of agree, the second weightage was given to strongly agree. Some students showed ignorance in their response to various questions in the questionnaire. Some students disagreed and some strongly disagreed.

5.1. Delimitations

The study has some certain delimitation as well.
- The study is delimited to the students of graduation level. Other students could also be taken for the study but it is confined only to the graduate level. So, the results cannot be generalized.
- The study is delimited to the students of tehsil Rahim Yar Khan and khan pur.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of task based language teaching to develop narrative writing skill of students. In this study quantitative data were collected and analysed. It was an experimental study conducted with two groups of MA English Part-I students at Khwaja Fareed Govt. Post Graduate College. One was treatment group whereas another was control group. The treatment group was taught through task based language

teaching. Pre and post tests were administrated to both control and experimental group. The results were in favour of the treatment group. The learners in experimental group improved their narrative writing skill at highly significant level. The perception questionnaire results were also in favour of TBLT. Statistical values give direction that experimental group improved significantly as compared to control group. The treatment helped the learners to improve narrative writing skill in terms of accuracy. The results show that task based language teaching can be taken as an alternative teaching methodology. It can be used extensively with those students who respond to TBLT positively. Almost all tasks were liked by the learners but task no 3 was highly liked by the students.

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