

What can Two Writing Tasks Tell Us about Language Performance during Uncontrolled Classroom Practices? An Exploratory Study of EFL Learners' Complexity, Fluency and Accuracy

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Abstract

For decades, task-based research has long used complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) as dimensions which determine and benchmark the inherent multidimensional processes of L2 performance. However, this previous research has been mainly conducted under experimental methodologies which control and modify classroom conditions and behaviours to an extent that do not reflect teaching and learning practices that are commonly initiated in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. In response to this, the present study set out to explore the effects of two writing tasks (argumentative and narrative) on EFL learners' CAF constructs during uncontrolled classroom practices. Drawing on metrics which index the levels of CAF, the findings show significant variability and trade-off effects in the levels of the three language performance areas. In exploring the transcribed data, the evidence demonstrates how the learners'

different goals and orientations can also be influential on their language performance in varied ways. These findings raise intriguing questions as to the way writing is practised and assessed in the language class in order to advance EFL learners' writing skills.

Keywords: accuracy, complexity, English as a foreign language, fluency, writing task.

Received July 7, 2017; Accepted November 14, 2017.

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Introduction

Along with the rapid growth of global education, teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has become a worldwide phenomenon. This phenomenon has required learners to develop skills in writing in order to determine academic success (Lillis & Curry, 2006). In the EFL classroom, writing tends to take on a distinct dimension; it is not only a discipline and a concept, but also an activity where practice always comes first. However, recent research evidence suggests that EFL writing involves skills that are difficult to learn (Richard & Renadya, 2002). Both the complexity and practical nature of writing is in itself a great challenge for EFL learners who have to write in a non-native language, and are assessed using native standards (Rosmawati, 2014). Another challenge for EFL teachers and learners concerns the development of writing skills in the language classrooms where an intricate, yet interrelated, set of factors (instructional, interactional and cognitive) affect and thus shape teaching, learning and interactional practices (García-Ponce, Crawford, Lengeling & Mora-Pablo, 2018). We can thus argue that it is now well established that the development of writing skills involves several factors which create an interaction of additional issues. It is this complex nature itself which has long attracted the attention of researchers with a view to understanding the development of writing skills (Hyland, 2003; Rosmawati, 2014).

In an attempt to explore the multidimensionality of written, as well as oral, production (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Norris & Ortega, 2009), previous studies have relied on complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) as a construct triad which “gauges, describes and benchmarks L2 production” (Rosmawati, 2014, p.77). However, the criticisms of these studies follow several lines. Firstly, they have been mostly conducted to investigate the dynamism of the CAF dimensions during oral production, leaving considerably unexplored the interplay between the CAF dimensions and L2 written production (Silva & Matsuda, 2002). Secondly, they have been so far carried out under experimental views which control the context and oral and written interactions in order to ensure that the intervention is implemented uniformly. This becomes a problem for individuals immersed in teaching and learning contexts because they have not been informed of the extent to which the instructional and interactional practices that they initiate in real classrooms are conducive to promoting the development of CAF in EFL written production.

In response to the above shortcomings, the present study aims to develop an understanding of the dynamism of CAF levels during the production of two written texts, i.e., argumentative and narrative tasks, in two uncontrolled EFL classrooms at a university in Mexico. Two research questions guide the study:

1. What is the behaviour of the learners' complexity, accuracy and fluency in argumentative and narrative tasks during uncontrolled classroom practices?
2. What can the data from the written compositions reveal about the learners' language performance?

Background

In an attempt to understand the nature of L2 performance, research has set out to determine and benchmark its inherent multidimensional processes (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Researchers, such as Larsen-Freeman (2006) and Skehan and Foster (2008), contend that the multidimensionality can effectively be captured by the notions of CAF. In Rosmawati's (2014) words, this triad "not only offers better perceptibility of development (evidenced by the changes in the numerical value of the indices) but also allows for better comparability across studies" (p.78). In this study, these dimensions are defined as follows.

1. *Complexity* is the extent to which L2 (written and oral) production reflects grammatically complex and advanced structures (Richards, 2015; Skehan, 2009).
2. *Accuracy* is considered as "a concern to avoid error" (Skehan, 2009, p.510). Accuracy can also be viewed as "the ability to produce target language that is free of grammatical and other errors" (Richards, 2015, p.730).
3. *Fluency* refers to "the extent to which target language production is continuous, without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication" (Richards, 2015, p. 738).

In order to understand the dynamism of the CAF triad, researchers have used tasks¹ because their design characteristics and implementation conditions (e.g., pre-task and online planning) reflect the cognitive demands and processes where learners need to produce the language in written and oral form (Walsh, 2002). Empirical studies have revealed that task design characteristics are highly influential on the dynamism of learners' CAF dimensions during writing tasks (see, for example, Kuhi, Rasuli & Deylami, 2014; Rosmawati, 2014; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Woodhall, 2002; among others). Interestingly, the findings of these previous studies have indicated that the design characteristics of tasks encourage learners to direct their attention to different dimensions, but not the three simultaneously.

Besides task design characteristics, some studies have pointed out the importance of implementation conditions (i.e., pre-task and online planning) during the performance of writing tasks. Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan (2011) argue that planning is an inseparable part of all written language use. Ellis (2005) goes further to suggest that learners need to decide what to write and how to carry it out. This implies that both task-based performance and planning should be important elements to consider while practising writing in the classroom. However, research evidence suggests that despite providing implementation conditions during writing task performance, learners still tend to be oriented towards some language performance dimensions, but not the three equally. Planning conditions provided to learners before (i.e., pre-task) or during (i.e., online planning) writing task performance can thus have significant effects on certain language performance areas, but not the three CAF dimensions simultaneously. The limitations of task design characteristics and implementation conditions to promote the three dimensions during writing task performance are, according to Skehan (1998), a consequence of learners' use of an imperfectly learned L2 which imposes a large burden on the learner's attention and causes the learner to make choices on being complex, being accurate and/or being fluent (as cited in Tavakoli & Foster, 2011). These effects are consistent with the Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan, 1998, 2003, 2009), which predicts that if a task demands more attention on one dimension, then the L2 performance will require less attention to others and thus performance therein.

¹ According to Tavakoli and Foster (2011), a task is "anything that classroom language learners do when focusing their attention primarily on what they want to say to others or what others are trying to say to them" (p. 39).

However, research literature on the interplay among task characteristics, planning conditions and the CAF dimensions are still scarce (De Larios, Marin & Murphy, 2001; Rahimpour & Nariman-Jahan, 2011). Much research has been carried out concerning speaking tasks, yet few studies have explored these constructs in writing tasks. In general, writing remains one of the least understood, if not misunderstood, subjects in applied linguistics (Silva & Matsuda, 2002). The studies in exploring language performance in writing tasks have been mainly conducted under experimental methodologies which control classroom conditions and behaviour. This tendency leads us to question the extent to which this previous research and findings reflect the common practices that are initiated in EFL teaching and learning contexts. Issues get even more complicated when taking into account that writing is not only practised and learned in the EFL classroom, but also used as an indicator of writing proficiency by standardised language tests (e.g., the TOEFL iBT, the TOEIC, IELTS, and the language certifications from the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations). The writing section in these tests is usually evaluated by composing essays based on tasks during which applicants need to build arguments and support their views. In general, they need to write their composition under word limits and in a time-frame manner. Drawing on the evidence discussed above, research reminds us that learners/applicants, even by providing them with planning conditions, may be oriented towards certain language performance areas during writing tests because of limitations in their cognitive processing. In this sense, we have potentially assessed writing performance in an unfair way to some extent.

In response to the above, the present study aims to develop an understanding of the effects of two writing tasks on the CAF levels of EFL learners without modifying the structure and dynamics of the classroom practices. That is, in order to yield findings that reflect teaching and learning practices in these two classrooms, we have tried to maintain the normal setting of where the learners perform writing activities. This involved selecting tasks that were familiar to the learners and implementing them by the teacher so as not to influence their behaviour before and during the performance of the two tasks. It is beyond the scope of this study to encompass all the factors that influence writing performance and thus CAF. However, the study is a starting point to investigate the interplay of writing performance and the behaviour of CAF during

uncontrolled classroom practices which are familiar to the language users in this teaching and learning context.

The study

The present study is part of a larger project which seeks to investigate the effects of several factors, including learners' agency (decision-making, perceptions, self-concepts, beliefs, etc.), motivation and goals, different writing and speaking tasks, varied design characteristics and implementation conditions (e.g., pre-task, online, and individual and collaborative planning), on EFL learners' CAF during uncontrolled classroom interactions. Following this aim, the nature of this study is twofold. It is firstly exploratory since the primary aim of the study is not to test hypotheses, but to explore the extent to which the two writing tasks which are commonly performed in this EFL context impact on the learners' levels of CAF. Based on our experience as language teachers and researchers, we believe that it is insufficient to rely on experimental views which do not always show a complete picture of what is happening in the language classroom. Instead, it is necessary to delve deeper into the subjective and intricate qualities that govern classroom behaviour (Holliday, 2002). Secondly, this study is naturalistic in the sense that the explorations were conducted in natural classroom settings without modifying their structure and dynamics, attempting to make sense of CAF phenomena in terms of the way learners commonly practise writing in the language classroom. By employing exploratory and naturalistic modes of enquiry, we thus attempt to develop a greater and deeper understanding of how writing tasks and other factors impact on EFL learners' CAF during uncontrolled classroom practices.

Research context

The study was conducted at a university in Mexico which offers four-year degree programmes for English or Spanish as foreign language teachers, and foreign language courses open to the general public. Specifically, the study took place in two classrooms where English is learned as a foreign language at an advanced level. In this context, the target language is practised for five hours per week. The classroom practices are focused on the four language skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading), grammar and vocabulary.

Participants

Prior to collecting the data from the writing tasks, we informed the teacher and learner participants of the research project, and how the data would be collected, processed and analysed. Moreover, we made sure that they knew their right to be protected from identification in the data, analysis and discussions, and to withdraw at any stage of the study. They all agreed to participate, and gave their permission on a Consent Form which was provided to them. In total, the participants of this exploratory study were 15 learners from two classrooms (seven from Classroom 1 and eight from Classroom 2) and one teacher, who taught in both classrooms. The learner participants were six males and nine females. Their age ranged from 18 to 30 years old. They were enrolled at advanced levels, but their English proficiency could fluctuate between intermediate and upper-intermediate. They were students and professionals who claimed to be keen to learn and improve their English writing skills because of academic and job requirements. The teacher participant was female, and 47 years old. She stated that she had taught English as a foreign language for more than 15 years.

Data collection

The data collection consisted of administering two writing tasks whose design characteristics resemble the writing tasks which these learners commonly perform, and which are used to teach to the exam (standardised language certifications) in this teaching and learning context. In order not to influence their performance during the writing tasks, we avoided interacting with the learners. Therefore, we asked the teacher to explain and administer the two tasks: argumentative and narrative tasks, described below.

1. *Argumentative task.* This task involves writing a short article (around 140-190 words) following this prompt:

Young people around 15-25 years old are spending more time every day on their computers than watching television. Is this a change for the

better?

We are interested in your opinions about this topic. Send us a short article with your views.

As indicated in the prompt, the learners were required to write an article arguing and justifying their views concerning the advantages or disadvantages of young people using computers or televisions. Following the information on the prompt, we expected that this task encouraged the learners to evaluate the written situation, retrieve information from their short- and long-term memory, and build arguments to defend their views. Therefore, we categorised this task as a difficult task because it possibly requires a great cognitive processing from the learners, compelling them perhaps to be oriented towards fluency and complexity, at the expense of accuracy during the performance of this writing task.

2. *Narrative task.* In this task, the learners need to narrate a personal experience following these directions:

Think about a time when you felt scared about something.
Tell about it.

As suggested in this prompt, the learners were required to write a composition regarding a past event during which they felt scared. Based upon the characteristics of this writing task, we expected that the learners would rely on personal information, making the task less cognitively demanding; firstly, because these tasks involve discussions of personal information, i.e., past experiences, which may have been rehearsed previously; secondly, the use of personal information that has been previously rehearsed eases the learners' cognitive processing load allowing them to retrieve easily information from their short-term memory (see Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan, 2003, 2009; Tavakoli & Foster, 2011). Following this, we classified this writing task as an easy task and expected that it would encourage the learners to focus their attention on the fluency and accuracy of their utterances, but compromising complexity.

It is worth noting that the two tasks were classified by the participant teacher and researchers according to their perceived difficulty (see Tavakoli, 2009). The two tasks were administered by the teacher without allowing any planning condition (such as pre-task planning) because she claimed that the absence of planning conditions reflected the way how writing tasks were commonly performed in her classrooms. In total, 30 writing samples, 15 from each task, were obtained from the 15 participant learners. The writing samples were then segmented into words, clauses and T-units, and tallied for measuring the learners' CAF dimensions in the two writing tasks.

Data analysis

Prior to measuring the learners' CAF dimension in the two writing tasks, the need to choose an appropriate unit to attain this became apparent. We believed that sentences as units would not be useful for the purpose of this study because punctuation is not sometimes consistent (Lintunen & Mäkilä, 2014). Instead, we chose the *minimal terminable unit* (T-unit) as a unit which allows measuring not only complexity, but also fluency and accuracy. According to Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki and Kim (1998), the T-unit is the best general measure for the CAF dimensions, as it correlates with learners' proficiency level (Rosmawati, 2014). A T-unit is defined as "being a minimal terminal unit or independent clause with whatever dependent clauses, phrases, and words are attached to or embedded within it" (Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p. 597). The learners' language performance during the two writing tasks was then explored through metrics which index fluency (number of words per T-unit), complexity (number of clauses per T-unit), and accuracy (number of error-free T-units per T-unit). According to Larsen-Freeman (2006), Larsen-Freeman and Strom (1977) and Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998), these metrics have been determined to be best measures to explore second language performance and development in writing. The following tables describe these metrics, starting with the fluency measure:

Table 1

Measure for fluency

Words per T-unit	Calculated by counting the total
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number of words in each composition, and dividing the total number by the learners' total number of T-units in that composition.

Consistent with Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998), the above length-based measure is indicative of fluency since the number of words per T-unit was found to index the learners' ability to construct the length of their constructions in a written manner.

The learners' complexity during the two tasks was indexed by clausal complexification which is commonly associated with the idea that "more means better" (Foster, Tonkyn & Wigglesworth, 2000, p.355). The following table shows the complexity-based metric included in this study:

Table 2

Measure for complexity levels

Clauses per T-unit	Calculated by counting the total number of learners' full clauses (independent and dependent), and dividing the result by the total number of learners' T-units in each composition.
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It is worth noting that self-repetitions and false starts were disregarded from the written data in order to measure accurately their compositions containing full ideas and intentions.

Prior to analysing accuracy, it was necessary to establish what constituted an error. The following criteria were then coded for identifying and counting errors in order to measure the learners' accuracy:

- Errors in word selection
- Errors in morphology
- Errors in syntax
- Errors in pronunciation
- False starts, hesitations and self-corrections were excluded

After identifying and counting the learners’ errors, the following holistic metric was used to determine the learners’ accuracy levels.

Table 3

Measure for accuracy levels

Error-free T-units per T-unit	Calculated by identifying and counting the total number of learners’ error-free T-units in each composition, and dividing the result by the total number of T-units produced by the learners.
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Although we used metrics that have been previously used in experimental studies, here we have simply diverged from the more traditional experimental approach and have chosen to look at the language production from a different viewpoint. We are focusing on naturalistic interpretations of the written compositions of the participants.

Findings and discussion

In order to address the question: What is the behaviour of the learners’ complexity, accuracy and fluency in argumentative and narrative tasks during uncontrolled classroom practices?, we explored the extent to which the design characteristics of the two writing tasks influenced the learners’ CAF dimensions during uncontrolled practices in two EFL classrooms. Overall, the results below confirm the general idea that task design characteristics influence the learners’ performance and particularly the CAF dimensions in a dynamic fashion. The tables below summarise the levels of the learners’ CAF during the argumentative (Task 1) and narrative (Task 2) tasks in Classroom 1 and Classroom 2.

Table 4

CAF dimensions (Classroom 1)

<u>Learner</u>	Fluency		Complexity		Accuracy	
	<u>Task 1</u>	<u>Task 2</u>	<u>Task 1</u>	<u>Task 2</u>	<u>Task 1</u>	<u>Task 2</u>
1	13.5	8.5	1.8	1.6	1.0	0.6
2	21	11.5	2.7	2.1	0.8	0.1
3	15.8	10.1	2.9	1.9	1.7	0.5

4	10.2	10.5	1.9	1.5	1.6	1.1
5	20.1	12.8	2.7	1.9	1.1	0.8
6	15.4	8.0	2.9	1.5	1.0	0.7
7	16.1	15.3	2.4	2.3	1.5	1.5
<i>Note:</i> Task 1=argumentative task; Task 2=narrative task; accuracy=these figures indicate that the higher the figures, the lower of accuracy in learners' written constructions.						

From Table 4, considerable variation can be noticed in the levels of each dimension, and across the three language performance areas of the seven learners in Classroom 1. It is possible that this marked variability is a consequence of several factors that come into play in language performance during uncontrolled classroom practices (see Ellis, 2009; Larsen-Freeman, 2009). As we shall see below, it seems that besides task design characteristics, learners' goals and orientations also influenced their language performance during writing tasks. What is also interesting about the data in this table is that there is a pattern of greater fluency and complexity than accuracy in Task 1 than in Task 2. A different pattern can be seen in Task 2; learners appeared to have promoted accuracy, compromising fluency and complexity. However, it seems that Learner 4 had a different orientation regarding his language performance in the narrative task. That is, fluent and slightly more complex written units were constructed during the narrative task, lowering the levels of accuracy. Similarly, the levels of Learner 7's language performance dimensions were similarly equal during the argumentative and narrative tasks. That is, fluency and complexity tended to be promoted by this learner during both tasks.

Table 5 also shows marked variability regarding the levels of the three language performance areas in Classroom 2, and trade-off effects between accuracy and fluency, and accuracy and complexity during the argumentative and narrative tasks.

Table 5

CAF dimensions (Classroom 2)

<u>Learner</u>	Fluency		Complexity		Accuracy	
	<u>Task 1</u>	<u>Task 2</u>	<u>Task 1</u>	<u>Task 2</u>	<u>Task 1</u>	<u>Task 2</u>
1	13	10.4	2.3	1.7	0.7	0.6
2	20.0	20.8	2.5	3.2	2.4	1.8
3	19.4	11.1	3.4	1.9	1.0	0.6

4	13.5	11.6	2.3	1.7	1.4	0.4
5	10.4	9.5	2.1	1.6	1.8	0.6
6	13.4	10.1	2.7	1.8	0.6	0.7
7	10.7	10.8	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.4
8	14.7	12.7	2.3	2.5	2.3	1.8
<i>Note:</i> Task 1=argumentative task; Task 2=narrative task; accuracy=these figures indicate that the higher the figures, the lower of accuracy in learners' written constructions.						

Again, as shown in Table 5, the levels of the learners' CAF in the two tasks are significantly varied. However, as in Table 4, it can be seen that there is a trend towards greater fluency and complexity in Task 1 (the argumentative task), but lower accuracy than in Task 2 (the narrative task). In contrast, accuracy in Task 2 appears to be promoted, at the expense of fluency and complexity. Similarly to Classroom 1, the most interesting aspect of these data is that there are also some learners (i.e., Learners 2, 7 and 8) who show different language performance orientations during Task 2. For example, as in Task 1, Learner 2 promoted fluency and complexity during Task 2, at the expense of accuracy. Similarly, Learner 7's written constructions during Task 2 were more fluent and complex but less accurate. This evidence suggests that besides task characteristics and demands, other learner-related factors may have encouraged these learners during Task 2 to be oriented towards fluency and complexity, compromising accuracy.

As shown in Tables 4 and 5, the levels of the three language performance areas were significantly varied during the two writing tasks. If we examined the learners' levels of CAF through a tight quantitative design, the results shown in both tables would be statistically insignificant because of the considerable variability. However, despite their statistical insignificance, we highlight the fact that these data come from real EFL classroom practices which were not controlled or modified deliberately. It is possible that the significant variability of the levels of CAF may be a consequence of several factors which come into play during uncontrolled teaching and learning practices. This suggestion is in line with Ellis (2009), Larsen-Freeman (2006, 2009) and van Lier (2004) who contend that besides task design characteristics, other important factors which shape the interaction of the CAF dimensions include, but are not limited to, the teaching and learning context, context-sensitive pressures and affordances, and

learners' proficiency, identities, orientations, goals and affective states. Based upon our evidence that uncontrolled teaching and learning practices may cause marked variability in the levels of CAF, we question the relevance and pedagogical value of previous experimental studies which have investigated the relation between task characteristics and the CAF constructs through a tight control and experimental design that may diverge from EFL classroom practices.

However, the evidence in Tables 4 and 5 showed that in both tasks there were trade-off effects between fluency and accuracy, and complexity and accuracy. Specifically, in most samples obtained from the argumentative task (Task 1), fluency and complexity tended to be promoted, at the expense of accuracy. As illustrated in Excerpt 1, it seems possible that the characteristics and demands of the task required the learners to be oriented towards fluency and complexity.

Excerpt 1

Sample of Task 1 (Learner 4, Classroom 1)

1	//(Long time ago, people are watching television in their houses)// //(They
2	spend a lot of time) (only sitting in front a big box with lights)// //(this
3	thing is unhealthy and not at all productive)// //(On television you could watch
4	documentals by Discovery channel or yoga classes by Discovery Home and Health)//
5	//(not all the people use television for) (increase their knowledge)// //(most
6	of them only watch trash programs) and (it is not good for increase something
7	inside their mind)//
8	
9	//(On the other side stay the internet)// //(you could use it for see movies
10	online), (create a homepage for your business) or (talkt with people) (who
11	lives in other countries)// //(You can use a computer for job or for your
12	social meetings)// //(these is a good point)// //(Probably a computer without
13	internet not be a good deal) (because today all the things that we could do
14	with a computer) (need necessary a good internet connexion)// //For example, (if
15	you want) (to send an E - mail) (you need internet)// //(if you want) (to buy
16	something for "mercado libre" or for "Ebay"), (you necessary need) (to creat
17	a profile in these web sites) and (have a good connexion)// //(Use a computer
18	instead a television, in my opinion is better) (because you could find more
19	interesting thing with your computer with a great internet connexion)// //(You
	could work hard with your computer) and (with a television you could not do
	that)// //(you only stay siting in front watching) (but you cannot
	participate)//

Note: // = T-unit boundary; () = clause boundary

In general, as shown in Excerpt 1, Learner 4 from Classroom 1 constructed sentences in which she discussed the advantages of young people using computers over televisions. For example, she used constructions, such as //you could use it for see movies online create a homepage for your business or talkt with people who lives in other countries// or //You can use a computer for job or for your social meetings//, which were in support of her views. In general, as can be seen in the two paragraphs, this learner constructed more fluent and complex T-units in order to defend her views regarding the use of computers. However, her T-units indicate several mistakes which in turn decrease the levels of accuracy. In order words, her sentences indicate trade-off effects between fluency and accuracy, and complexity and accuracy. As stated previously, we categorised this task as difficult because it involves several demanding cognitive processes, i.e., assessing the situation, retrieving experiential and perceptual information from the short- and long-term memory, formulating and constructing language, without pre-task or online planning conditions. In order to achieve their purpose during this complex task, the learners needed to construct more fluent and complex units compromising accuracy since accuracy and complexity (both components of language form) cannot be promoted equally (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Skehan, 1998). Then, if we adopt Skehan's (1998) model, it seems possible that learners in argumentative tasks, which require them to build arguments and defend opinions, opt to adopt a 'accuracy last approach,' which in Ellis and Barkhuizen's (2005) words refers to an approach "where they attempt to utilize language requiring controlled processing but are unable to pay attention to it" (p.144), as a consequence of attention burden which was placed by the characteristics of this task. Nevertheless, as we shall discuss below, our argument is that it is not always possible to predict the effects of tasks because learners' orientations and goals during task performance can influence their written production in varied and unpredictable ways.

A different pattern was found in the narrative task; accuracy levels were higher than fluency and complexity levels. As illustrated in Excerpt 2, it seems that the familiarity of the task and discussions of personal information encouraged the learners to promote accuracy, compromising fluency and complexity.

Excerpt 2

Sample of Task 2 (Learner 3, Classroom 2)

1	//(I remembered about 4 or 5 years ago)// //(I was in high school// //(when I
2	arrived to my house) (my oldest brother gave me bad news about my dad)// //(He
3	suffered a heart attack) and (for that reason he was in the hospital)// //(In
4	that moment I felt terrible) (because I thought) (that my dad was in a real
5	danger) and (could be the first time) (that I saw him really really ill)//
6	//(I saw my mom so sad) and (worry about my dad)// (it was a really bad
7	experience)//
8	
9	//After one or two weeks, (the doctor said) (that my dad was better) and (he
10	only had) (to rest) but (also had to make changes in his daily life)// //(I
	think) (this is one of my worst memories) (that I have) and (it was one of the
	times) (I felt scared)//
	<i>Note: // = T-unit boundary; () = clause boundary</i>

In Excerpt 2, Learner 3 from Classroom 2 wrote about the moment he felt scared because of his father's health problems. As can be seen in this excerpt, the learner constructed units to narrate a personal experience which happened in the past, e.g., //when I arrived to my house, my oldest brother gave me bad news about my dad//. The T-units and clauses tended to be free of errors, having an impact on the increase of his accuracy. However, the learners' written constructions included a small number of words and single clauses, influencing in turn low fluency and complexity levels (see Table 5). This task, which required the learners to recall and retrieve past and personal, may have enabled them to adopt a 'safety-first approach' by using language for which they have already developed automatic processing. In other words, it is possible that the narrative task encouraged the learners to recall and/or use information from ready-made content schemata, i.e., information that may have possibly been rehearsed previously, involving attention processing demands at the lowest level (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), and thus the learners' orientations towards accuracy (see Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan, 2003, 2009; Tavakoli & Foster, 2011). However, as shown in Tables 4 and 5, this pattern of high accuracy levels was not always evident across the written compositions in this task. That is, Learners 4 and 7 from Classroom 1 and Learners 2, 7 and 8 from Classroom 2 showed orientations towards fluency and complexity, at the expense of accuracy. In order to address the question What can the data from the written compositions reveal about the learners' language performance?, we then decided to return to the data collected from the written compositions, and

found that these five learners' written constructions in the narrative task served similar functions to those of the argumentative task, as illustrated in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

Sample of Task 2 (Learner 7, Classroom 2)

1	//(Feel fair or scared is a feeling sad) (because you need) (that your
2	stronge was lost)// //(Always that I had to do some exam) (I was feeling
3	scared)// //(Why was I feeling this?)// //(If the learn have) (to be funny)
4	and (I should enjoy)// //(I understood) (that I felt bad) (when I had) (to
5	present) or (do sone exam special in the asignature of English)// //(It is
6	because always) (I didn' t pass almost all my exams of English)// //Too,
7	(sometimes when I went to class of english), (I felt insecure) and (I felt
8	scaned) (because I couldn' t understand) (when some teachers explain their
9	activities) and (always I had to present quiz every week)//
10	
11	//(One day I discovered) or (found a solution) (for destroyed my negatives
12	feelings about the learn of english)// //(I took a desition) and (I went to
13	the caddi) and (I discovered) (that when you feel free in your learn) (you
14	can feel enjoyed the learn) and (you never feel scared) (when you have to
15	present an exam)// //(Now I am contining don' t pass sone exams of English)
16	(but I think) (this is normal) (because I have) (to study hard)// //(I lost
17	scarded) (for example speak English) (now I am enjoying learn english more
18	than two years ago)// //(I always practice out side of classroom) (because I
19	like feel good) (when I am staying study) and (in this moment I don' t think
	about a some grade)// //(I think) (that when you stay learn) (to speak other
	lenguajes) (you should feel free) and (enjoy your learn)//
<i>Note: // = T-unit boundary; () = clause boundary</i>	

As shown in Excerpt 3, Learner 7 describes why learning English has made her feel scared. What is interesting about the data in this excerpt is that the learner constructed written language not only to describe the reasons why she felt scared, but also to justify her feelings and support her arguments. For example, she used T-units such as //too, sometimes when I went to class of english, I felt insecure and I felt scaned because I couldn't understand when some teachers explain their activities and always I had to present quiz every week// to mention the reason of her insecurity, or //I think that when you stay learn to speak other lenguajes you should feel free and enjoy your learn// to justify and support her arguments regarding the benefits of practicing English. In general, we can see that the learner approached the task in two ways: to describe her feelings of insecurity, and justify her arguments concerning this feeling. It is

particularly the use of hypotactic language to argue her points that increased her levels of complexity and fluency, lowering the levels of accuracy. In other words, the behaviour of this learner's CAF in the narrative task was similar to the argumentative task, in which the learners were required to build and defend their arguments. Taken together, this evidence suggests that besides task design characteristics, learners' orientations and goals during writing tasks may also influence the way they approach tasks and thus their language performance in unpredictable ways.

The practical relevance of the above findings is for language teachers, learners and testers. Firstly, the above findings show that during uncontrolled classroom practices, learners' CAF dimensions may engage in a dynamic, yet varied, interaction which is a consequence of not only task characteristics that can deliberately be designed to promote the three dimensions, but also other factors that can be intricate in nature and influential on the unpredictable dynamism of learners' CAF. In this sense, we call for teaching and learning practices, specifically, writing tasks which are realistic in terms of the learners' language performance and take into account the limitations of L2 learners' cognitive processing. Secondly, language tests (e.g., standardised language examinations which certify individuals' language competence) should be more sensitive to the characteristics of writing tasks which, as we saw in this study, were unable to promote the learners' three language performance areas equally. To this end, these organisations should see writing performance not as a linear process, but as a dynamic process which can be influenced by the most minimal change in the characteristics of the tasks, teaching and learning context, time pressures, learners' perceptions, goals and orientations, etc. and thus not reflect the current state of learners' writing development. By taking into consideration all the factors which come into play during writing performance, we would then be assessing learners' writing performance in a fairer way. However, this suggestion requires further research which aims at understanding better the interplay between EFL writing performance, task design characteristics, implementation conditions and uncontrolled classroom practices so its findings are relevant for teachers and learners who dedicate the time and space for teaching and learning writing skills.

Conclusions

The present study set out to explore the effects of two writing tasks on EFL learners' CAF constructs during classroom practices which were not modified. We began this small-scale study with the premise that the design characteristics of writing tasks highly influence the learners' language performance areas. However, as language teachers and researchers, we were not satisfied with the idea that language performance areas, i.e., complexity, accuracy and fluency, have been mostly investigated under controlled classroom conditions which do not always happen in real practice. Therefore, we decided to reconsider the methodological aspects involved in the explorations of the learners' CAF, and set out to examine the dynamism of these dimensions from a naturalistic perspective, that is, not influencing and controlling classroom practices.

By having adopted this perspective, from both methodological and analytical lenses, we found that there was significant variability in the levels of each language performance dimension in both the argumentative and narrative tasks. We argued that this variability is not shown in experimental studies because they have controlled the classroom practices and interactions in order to yield uniform findings that can be generalised. However, the findings of our study suggest that the learners' CAF during uncontrolled classroom practices may be varied as a consequence of several factors that shaped the levels of the CAF triad. Despite this variability, the findings showed some patterns. In the argumentative task, the learners tended to promote fluency and complexity, compromising accuracy. This may imply that learners, when confronted with a cognitively challenging activity, choose to take risks and challenge their linguistic limitations. In the narrative task, the learners during the performance of this task were oriented towards solely promoting accuracy.

We believe that these trade-off effects should be taken into account by the organisations which test and certify language proficiency. It is possible that due to limitations in the attention processing of learners/applicants, they have been assessed in an unfair manner in the task performance of these standardised tests. Based upon this, we call for tasks which not only promote real-life language performance, but also consider the cognitive processing capabilities of language users. In order to attain this, further research should be conducted in order to capture,

besides design characteristics, the factors which play an important role in task performance during uncontrolled EFL classroom practices.

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