

Investigating Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' writing skills based on principal component analysis

Investigando as habilidades de escrita dos alunos iranianos de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL) com base na análise dos componentes principais

Investigación de las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) basada en el análisis de componentes principales

Behrouz Kamali¹

Payman Rajabi²

Hossein Ahmadi³

Resumo: Identifying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing components involves an intricate network of principles and approaches that also involve assessment models. Methods of teaching and assessing writing are normally compatible with the purposes or expectations of writing-specific courses/programs. This study investigated the most important academic writing constructs in Iranian EFL students based on principal component analysis. To this end, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered and based on its results, 60 (out of 114) Iranian EFL male and female learners from Islamic Azad University, Broujerd Branch, Iran, were randomly selected as the homogeneous sample of the study. Additionally, 100 EFL teachers from four language institutes were asked to participate. Three instruments were used, namely OPT, a survey questionnaire, and writing tasks. The data were analyzed through principal component analysis. The findings revealed that the most important constructs in the Iranian EFL students' writing skills were "mode", "assessment", and "mechanics", respectively. The findings of the study suggested implications for second language (L2) writing improvement from a practical and theoretical perspective. The findings, more specifically, could shed light on current practices and theories, and could prove useful for practitioners and future studies in the field of second language writing.

Palavras-chave: *Iranian EFL Students. Survey questionnaire, Writing components. Writing skill*

Abstract: *A identificação dos componentes da redação em English as a Foreign Language (EFL) envolve uma rede intrincada de princípios e abordagens que, por sua vez, também envolvem modelos de avaliação. Os métodos de ensino e avaliação da redação são, normalmente, compatíveis com os objetivos ou expectativas de cursos/programas específicos da redação. Este estudo investigou os construtos de escrita acadêmica mais importantes em estudantes de EFL iranianos, com base na análise do componente principal. Para este fim, um Teste de Colocação de Oxford (OPT) foi administrado, e com base em seus resultados, 60 de 114 alunos de EFL iranianos do sexo masculino e feminino da Islamic Azad University, Broujerd Branch, Irã, foram selecionados aleatoriamente como a amostra homogênea do estudo. Além disso, 100 professores de EFL de quatro institutos de idiomas foram convidados a participar. Três instrumentos foram usados, a saber, OPT, um questionário de pesquisa e tarefas de escrita. Os dados foram analisados por meio da análise de componentes principais. Os resultados revelaram que os construtos mais importantes nas habilidades de escrita dos alunos de EFL iranianos eram "modo", "avaliação" e "mecânica", respectivamente. Os resultados do estudo sugeriram implicações para a melhoria da escrita em segunda língua (L2) de uma perspectiva prática e teórica. As descobertas, mais especificamente, podem lançar luz sobre as práticas e teorias atuais, podendo ser úteis para profissionais e estudos futuros no campo da escrita em uma segunda língua.*

1 PhD student of teaching English, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran.

2 Assistant Professor in TEFL, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran.

3 Assistant Professor in TEFL, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran.

Keywords: *Componentes de redação. Estudantes iranianos de inglês. Habilidades de redação. Questionário de pesquisa.*

Resumen: *La identificación de los componentes de la escritura em English as a Foreign Language (EFL) implica una intrincada red de principios y enfoques que también involucran modelos de evaluación. Los métodos de enseñanza y evaluación de la escritura son normalmente compatibles con los propósitos o expectativas de los cursos / programas específicos de escritura. Este estudio investigó los constructos de escritura académica más importantes en estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera en función del análisis de componentes principales. Con este fin, se administró una prueba de nivel de Oxford (OPT) y, según sus resultados, 60 (de 114) estudiantes iraníes de EFL, hombres y mujeres, de la Universidad Islámica de Azad, Broujerd Branch, Irán, fueron seleccionados aleatoriamente como muestra homogénea de la estudio. Además, se pidió la participación de 100 profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera de cuatro institutos de idiomas. Se utilizaron tres instrumentos, a saber, OPT, un cuestionario de encuesta y tareas de redacción. Los datos se analizaron mediante análisis de componentes principales. Los hallazgos revelaron que los constructos más importantes en las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera eran el “modo”, la “evaluación” y la “mecánica”, respectivamente. Los hallazgos del estudio sugirieron implicaciones para la mejora de la escritura en segunda lengua (L2) desde una perspectiva práctica y teórica. Los hallazgos, más específicamente, podrían arrojar luz sobre las prácticas y teorías actuales, y podrían resultar útiles para los profesionales y futuros estudios en el campo de la escritura en un segundo idioma.*

Palabras-clave: *Componentes de escritura. Cuestionario de encuesta. Estudiantes iraníes de inglés. Habilidad de escritura.*

INTRODUÇÃO

Writing is a productive language skill and is usually considered the most challenging skill to master among the four central language skills. Writing, which is essential to communication and learning, is viewed as a powerful mode of communication (BROWN, 2004). Hadley (2017) describes the process of learning to write in a second language (L2) is considered as spectrum of various tasks ranging from mechanical activities to more complex cognitive processes. In this regard, writing skill is initially produced via “skill-getting” activities focusing on interpreting how different aspects of language work (e.g. grammar, syntax, lexicon, cohesive devices); then, the focus was toward the practical activities through which learners engage in more complex processes such as expression and communication. In writing instruction, these activities are normally structured in line with the purpose of and approach to writing assumed in a course.

According to Kurt and Atay (2007), writing skills are not easy; for some reasons, such skills are usually viewed as the last ones to be developed in the domains of language skills. Writing demands a combination of different cognitive, linguistic, motor, and affective

abilities. Furthermore, Jahin and Idrees (2012) argue that writing entails a coordination between content, vocabulary, spelling, organization and mechanics. Hapsari (2011) maintains that writing is generally known as the most difficult language skill. The difficulty consists in generating and organizing ideas and mastering the different aspects of writing, such as grammar, spelling, word choice, punctuation, etc. In addition, Graham and Perin (2007) believes that all these competences required for writing make this skill difficult because it involves the use of both linguistic and cognitive strategies, although learners may not be able to fully develop them. In fact, writing in general is a problem-solving activity that rests on such cognitive processes as thinking and memory (GRAHAM; HARRIS; BEARD, 2019). As English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face writing-specific challenges, language teachers try to respond by implementing practices from a variety of approaches or teaching orientations.

However, according to Brown (2004), writing is considered much more difficult than the other language skills, speaking, listening and reading. Most of learners need more time to acquire writing skills successfully. This ability could also contribute to career development. A person who can write effectively is regarded as

someone who is well-educated and an effective communicator, negotiator or professional. All these advantages highlight the significance of learning writing.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring the history writing skills teaching reveals that among the different approaches practiced in writing instruction, three approaches have been the most influential ones: product-oriented approach, process-oriented approach, and genre-based approach. Numerous studies have indicated that all these approaches involve both weaknesses and strengths, and that they could help to complement each other (KNOCH; MACQUEEN, 2019; UZUN; TOPKAYA, 2020).

As Harmer explains (2004), there are different approaches to the practice of writing skills in the classroom; to choose the appropriate approach for students, teachers have to decide whether they want students to focus on the process of writing more than its product, whether they want students to study different written genres, or whether they want to encourage students' creativity in writing. Among different trends, over the last 20 years the process-oriented and product-oriented approaches have become more dominant in education about writing in ESL classrooms.

The product-oriented approach concentrates on the construction of the end-product of writing, rather than the process of writing itself. On the contrary, the process-oriented approach to writing underscores the various stages that a piece of writing goes through to be completed. However, according to Tribble (1996) and Kim and Moon (2019), over the last ten years, genre-based approaches have been gaining more prominence.

The product-oriented line of writing studies offers a well-established educational method through which the learner is asked to mirror a section of a sample text, often in the early stages of learning the language in question (GABRIELATOS, 2002). According to Hammadi (2016), in an ordinary product approach-centered class, learners are given an example of writing and are asked to follow the example and adapt their production to it as closely as possible.

The product-oriented approach is the most common and traditional approach used by EFL teachers. Brown (2004) suggests that in product-focused methods, fruitful learning is determined by the extent to which the text is well-organized and grammatically accurate. Gabrielatos (2002) argues that a product-oriented approach is a conventional method in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text that is usually presented and analyzed at an early stage. For instance, in a typical product-oriented classroom, students receive a standard sample of a text and are then expected to follow the standard to construct a new piece of writing.

However, process-oriented approaches are concerned with how ideas are developed and formulated in writing. Harmer (2004, p. 26) states, "[a] process approach asks students to consider the procedure of putting together a good piece of work". In this approach writing is considered a process through which meaning is created by following a number of stages.

Genre represents the norms of different kinds of written text-types. The genre-based method is one of the most recent approaches to teaching instruction. When teachers concentrate on genre, they encourage students to investigate texts based on the specifications of the genre based on which they should frame their writing task. For example, if students are asked to write a business letter, first the teacher shows them a typical model of such a business letter and then students start to compose their own versions (HARMER, 1998). Genre-based approaches share many commonalities with product-oriented approaches and can be recognized as an extension of product approaches. Like product approaches, genre-focused approaches view writing as a predominantly linguistic activity, although they emphasize writing varieties in terms of social situations (UZUN; TOPKAYA, 2020).

The quality of writing, however, is not exclusively limited to the learning of linguistic items and gaining mastery over different dimensions of performance. In essence, the way people produce language in both oral and written forms may be affected by different

factors (NOSRATINIA; ABBASI; ZAKER, 2015). Hammadi (2016) argues that students do not usually exhibit adequate linguistic knowledge, cohesion, and academic style; furthermore, in the case of L2 teaching/learning, some students tend to resort to word-for-word translation when writing their tasks. In the Iranian context, which is an EFL environment, a number of researchers (HASANI; MOGHADAM, 2012; MIRZAILI, 2012) have reported that the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners is not satisfactory. The present study further explores the Iranian EFL context.

2.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Learning to write in one's first language (L1), L2 or foreign language seems to be the most difficult skill to acquire (NEGARI, 2012). Confirming this observation, Richards (2008) points out that learning to write in either L1 or L2 is one of the most difficult tasks students encounter and one that few people fully master. Kroll (2003) and Ortega (2014) also contend that writing is a complex process that involves the mastery of multiple skills, which is a factor contributes to the overall difficulty of writing for any language user. Thus, it is a challenging and difficult skill for both native and non-native speakers.

Considering the demands constituting writing skills, it would be necessary to investigate what problems students experience in writing reports, essays and summaries, or to explore what strategies they are able to apply when dealing with composition tasks. Such investigations could further reveal students' failures and strategies, while facilitating teachers' feedback on composition writing. Good writing demands practice and effective feedback, two components that teachers must underscore in their instructions. In addition, knowing the basic patterns of writing may help language teachers and learners of a foreign language to have a vivid picture of the writing process. Therefore, highlighting such patterns would be effective in EFL writing pedagogy. As the literature reviewed in this previous section showed, no study specifically focused on EFL writing patterns in an Iranian EFL context. Therefore, the present study was an attempt

to explore the most important writing-related constructs in an Iranian EFL writing environment based on principal component analysis.

3 METHODOLOGICAL

3.1 Participants

Consulting with two language experts (PhD holders in TEFL), the researcher decided to select learners who scored one standard deviation (+1SD) above and (-1SD) below the mean in the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) to gather a homogeneous sample of the participants. As a result, based on the results of an OPT administered, 60 (out of 114) Iranian male and female EFL learners from Azad University, Broujerd Branch, Iran, were randomly selected as the homogeneous participants of this study. Additionally, 100 EFL teachers working in four language institutes were asked to participate in the research.

3.2 Instrumentation

In order to measure and determine the participants' level of general English proficiency and to ensure their homogeneity, they were required to take the standard test (i.e., OPT). The test was primarily used to measure and determine the participants' level of general English language proficiency and ensure their homogeneity. It consisted of three sections, namely listening, reading, and structure. It included 100 items in the form of multiple-choice questions.

To measure the latent traits and the relationships between the writing components, a structured survey questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire included 15 items based on a five-point Likert scale ("Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neither Agree nor Disagree", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree"). These items examined modes of writing, assessment practices, mechanics of writing, coherence and cohesion in writing, the point of view component of writing, word-choice, style, genre, and supporting materials in writing.

The third instrument consisted of two writing tasks. Each task included three composition topics (e.g., friendship, family, history, education). The participants had to write

two paragraphs for each topic. The topics were reviewed by three experts and a pilot study was conducted with the participation of 10 language learners to ensure the validity and reliability of the topics, respectively. The reliability of each research instrument was then calculated and reported. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated for each field of the questionnaire and interview.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

With reference to the experts' judgment and the literature review, 10 writing components constituting EFL writing skills were identified. Subsequently, in the survey, the participants were asked to respectively rate the relative importance of the identified writing components. The alternatives available to the participants were: "Not Important (1)", "Less Important (2)", "Fairly Important (3)", "Very Important (4)", and "Extremely Important (5)". After selecting a homogeneous

sample of participants, most important components in L2 writing were observed in the two tasks performed by the students. In these tasks, the students were asked to write two argumentative essays on a topic within 30 minutes. The English essays were then rated by two independent raters (inter-rater reliability), to examine the most important constructs in their writing. Finally, through principal component analysis, the specifications of the most important components in L2 writing were clarified.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected, principal component analysis (PCA) was utilized. The first step in PCA is to indicate some proper issues concerning the appropriate sample size so that the reliability of the factor analysis is ensured (Field, 2005). Furthermore, the data were subjected to the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy.

Table 1- Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. D	Analysis N
Mode	.53	.502	100
Assessment	.62	1.071	100
Mechanics	.5200	.50212	100
Coherence	.6200	1.07101	100
Cohesion	.5300	.50161	100
Point of View	.6500	1.06719	100
Word choice	.5400	.50091	100
Style	.5000	.50252	100
Genre	.5200	.50212	100
Supporting materials	.5500	.50000	100

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

Table 1 reports the mean and standard deviation of each writing-related component. In addition, the Analysis N column shows the number of valid cases. In this analysis, no value is missing because the entire sample included 100 participants. Furthermore, as

shown in Table 2, the R2 value for each of the components included in the analysis is reported using the factors as IVs and the items as DVs. It represents the proportion of variance of each item that is explained by the factors.

Table 2 - Communalities of the Writing Components

	Initial
Mode	1.000
Assessment	1.000
Mechanics	1.000
Coherence	1.000
Cohesion	1.000
Point of View	1.000
Word choice	1.000
Style	1.000
Genre	1.000
Supporting Materials	1.000

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

Table 3 - Total Variance Explained

Compon ent	Initial Eigenvalues			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	4.086	51.08	20.516	1.975
2	1.841	23.010	34.539	1.308
3	1.309	16.365	90.455	1.354
4	1.160	11.603	58.817	1.368
5	.991	9.907	68.725	
6	.877	8.773	77.498	
7	.831	8.310	85.808	
8	.615	6.149	91.957	
9	.564	5.643	97.600	
10	.240	2.400	100.000	

Extraction method: principal component analysis.

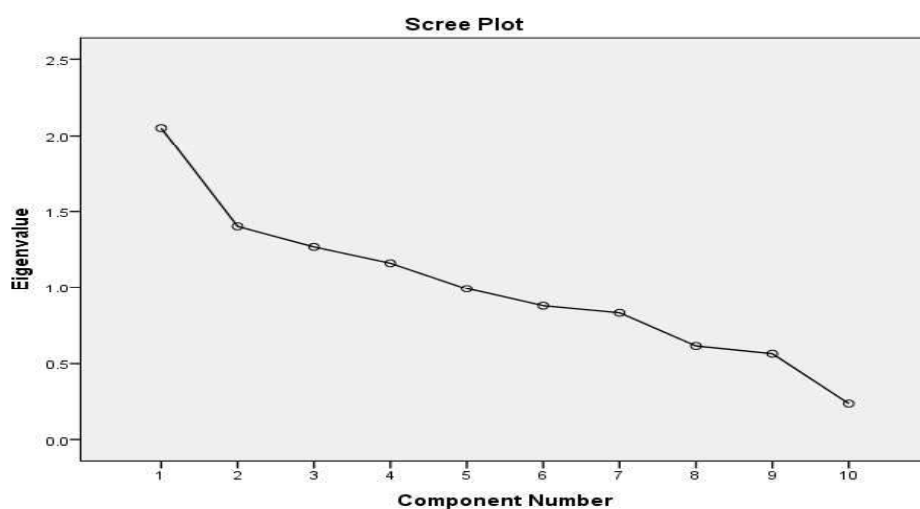
Note: When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

As illustrated in Table 3, based on the initial eigenvalues, the first three components were significant as they had Eigenvalues greater than 1. Components 1, 2 and 3 explained

51.08%, 23.01%, and 16.37% of the variance, respectively, a cumulative total value of 90.46% (total acceptable).

Figure 1- Scree plot for the writing components



Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

As Figure 1 depicts, the plot shows that there were three relatively high (components 1, 2, and 3) eigenvalues. The components to retain were above the “bend”, the point at which the curve of decreasing eigenvalues changes from a steep line to a flat gradual slope. Then, to represent information from the initial unrotated factor matrix was also

created. The values were the weights of the items (or variables) to the corresponding component. All the items had relatively high positive weights with the first component. At this stage, the solution did not take into consideration the correlation between the three components (Table 4).

Table 4 - Factor Matrix^a

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Mode	.351	-.205	-.253	-.202
Assessment	-.148	-.130	-.599	.016
Mechanics	-.189	-.098	.762	-.195
Coherence	-.082	.711	.258	.298
Cohesion	.009	.118	-.204	.854
Point of View	-.018	.088	-.015	-.482
Word choice	-.209	.577	-.471	-.255
Style	.893	.010	.113	-.022
Genre	-.882	-.040	.018	-.121
Supporting materials	.361	.614	-.026	-.313

Extraction method: principal component analysis.

Rotation method: oblimin with kaiser normalization.a

a. Rotation converged in 24 iterations.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

In addition, the goodness-of-fit test determined whether the sample data (correlations) were likely to have arisen from the three correlated factors. In this situation, the probability value of the chi-square statistic

should be greater than the chosen alpha (generally 0.05). Based on the results, the three-component model provided a good description of the data.

Table 5- Chi- Square Statistics

Chi-square	df.	Sig.
5.004	9	.622

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

The pattern matrix shows the factor loadings for the rotated solution. Factor loadings are similar to regression weights (or slopes) and indicate the strength of the association between the variables and the factors. The solution was rotated to achieve an interpretable structure. It should be noted

that when the components are uncorrelated the pattern matrix and the structure matrix should be the same. However, because the components in the present study were correlated, the pattern matrix and the structure matrix were different. Tables 6 and 7 represent the results.

Table 6 - *Pattern Matrix*^a

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Mode	.351	-.205	-.253	-.202
Assessment	-.148	-.130	-.599	.016
Mechanics	-.189	-.098	.762	-.195
Coherence	-.082	.711	.258	.298
Cohesion	.009	.118	-.204	.854
Point of View	-.018	.088	-.015	-.482
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Supporting materials	.361	.614	-.026	-.313

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.^a

a. Rotation converged in 24 iterations.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

Table 7 - Structure Matrix

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Mode	.404	-.210	-.303	-.278
Assessment	-.110	-.137	-.590	-.030
Mechanics	-.202	-.069	.747	-.065
Coherence	-.165	.703	.313	.307
Cohesion	-.113	.071	-.094	.821
Point of View	.055	.113	-.074	-.486
Word choice	-.159	.588	-.481	-.311
Style	.889	-.014	.056	-.145
Genre	-.864	-.006	.056	.019
Supporting materials	.392	.619	-.077	-.403

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

As reported in Table 7, the structure matrix shows the correlations between the components and the items for the rotated

solution. In addition, the factor correlation matrix shows that components 1, 2 and 3 were statistically correlated (Table 8)

Table 8 - Component correlation matrix

Components	1	2	3	4
1	1.000	-.030	-.061	-.154
2	-.030	1.000	.017	-.051
3	-.061	.017	1.000	.126
4	-.154	-.051	.126	1.000

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2020).

4 RESULTS

The findings revealed that the most important constructs in Iranian EFL writing skills were "mode", "assessment", and "mechanics", respectively. The ability to write well is an essential component of a student's academic

skills. Among all the four skills in English, writing seems to be the most difficult one to master. This is especially true for L2 students who are not proficient in the L2 and whose only source of L2 exposure is experienced in ESL/EFL classroom. In order to discover what predicts

the underlying factors in EFL writing and the conditions in which writing skills can be taught optimally, the nature of L2 writing must first be understood. This can be achieved by probing into the process of writing and by identifying individual factors that could help to predict writing performance. According to Flowerdew (1993) and Huang and Zhang (2019), in L2 writing the process of idea generation and the use of long-term memory are more complex. Students usually fail to organize their long-term memory information (ideas) with the topic and the language of expression. This confusion, as Flowerdew argues, hinders the process of idea generation. It is, therefore, assumed that learners experience this kind of difficulty due to a lack of L2 proficiency. The fact that they have a very limited scope of academic experience (in tertiary education) also accounts for their lower levels of proficiency in writing.

4.1 DISCUSSION

Identifying the EFL writing components involves an intricate network of principles and approaches emerging from the larger body of general writing theory and assessment. The approaches are often compatible with the set of writing skills that a course or program offers. An effective practice of assessing EFL writing must be grounded in a thorough knowledge of assessment fundamentals. EFL writing instructors who lack adequate assessment literacy may mistakenly treat writing as a mere psychometric, statistical process, which ignores important aspects of language learning and provides no direct feedback to teaching. Written language is a medium of communication, and if assessing writing does not help to prepare EFL writers for wider range of communication abilities, the role of writing programs in developing literacy would be undermined.

This finding, of course, is not in line with what Otaiba (2015) found; in his investigation of kindergarten students, he did not find any structural difference in terms of gender, although differences emerging only in a gender on writing measures. Otaiba discussed the possibility that the difference was due to

within-group differences, as the constructs were similarly correlated with each other across the groups overall, which implied that there were no measured structural differences in the participants' writing achievement.

While the sample of the Lee and Otaiba's (2015) research was considerably different from the one investigated in the present study, the structural similarity in terms of gender could be a finding observed in both of the two studies. Additionally, the observation of a structural similarity between genders in writing skills was an element that both the present study and that of Lee and Otaiba (2015) had in common in relation to the gender similarities hypothesis (Hyde et al., 1988).

Generally, the findings in this study supported the views of Cumming (1989), who stated that a higher level of L2 proficiency was associated with higher ratings on content, organization and language use in writing skills. The present study found that higher language knowledge was associated with higher writing performance. Similarly, the findings regarding the role of L2 proficiency in the use of writing strategies were consistent with Sasaki's (2000) observations, who argued that L2 proficiency appeared to explain part of differences in writing skills.

5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As the findings revealed, the following conclusions could be drawn. First, gender as a moderator variable played no role in the writing constructs measured in the sample of the Iranian academic students. Second, L2 proficiency was an important factor in L2 writing performance and played a mediating role in a learner's capacity to use writing skills effectively. Although other factors contributed to differences in writing performance, L2 proficiency appeared to be the most predictive variable. Second, L2 writing skill test specifications were relevant to writing performance and they should be developed in line with learners' level of L2 proficiency. Writing skill test specifications alone do not seem to be sufficient for the development of

writing performance. It is a synergy between L2 proficiency and writing constructs that makes a good writer.

The findings of the present study have implications for the improvement of L2 writing from practical and theoretical perspectives. The findings of the present work should inform current practice and theory, and prove useful for practitioners and future researchers in the field of L2 writing. L2 writers face cognitive challenges when it comes to academic writing. Compared to L1 writers, L2 writers have to acquire proficiency in the use of the language, as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills, in order to produce texts in an L2. Among the various skills involved in text production, the act of composing appears to be the most challenging issue for L2 writers. It is at this composing stage that the writer draws on information from his/her memory (including long-term memory) to solve problems and put together ideas for the purpose of text production.

The overall findings of this research suggest that the L2 proficiency, as a limiting factor, determines not only writing performance but also the use of writing components. Therefore, ESL writing classes should be mostly concerned with developing learners' proficiency skills to build a strong foundation in writing. Research has shown that skills and strategies in L1 can be transferred to L2 writing when the learner has acquired a sufficient level of L2 proficiency.

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