

## THE EFFECT OF IRANIAN STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN WRITING ON COMPOSING IN PERSIAN

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**ABSTRACT:** *Learning English as a foreign language would basically encompass a vast variety of the learners' activities including almost whatever they see, hear, read, write; the conversations they conduct with friends, and their behavior in social situations, etc. One of the crucial skills of language learning is writing skill. However, this skill has received little attention due to its complexity. As students who are skilled at writing in their own languages and have surpassed a certain second language proficiency level can transfer those skills in their second languages, it is possible for them to transfer second language writing habits to their first language writing. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of Iranian students' English language proficiency in writing on composing in Persian. It can be of help towards discovering the possible relationship between Iranian students' second language (English) and first language (Persian) writing competence. To accomplish this goal, in this study, 20 university students majoring in English were randomly selected and given two composition tasks on two different occasions. The final drafts, English and Persian, were compared and analyzed based on NTID Writing Test Categories (adopted from Mirahmadi, 2011) by six experienced raters – three teachers in EFL and three teachers in Persian literature and writing at university level. Eventually it was revealed that there is a relationship between English language proficiency in writing and the use of the L2 rhetorical patterns in the Persian composition of EFL learners.*

**Key Words:** *composing in Persian, composition strategy, English language proficiency, transfer.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years a number of changes have occurred in the field of foreign language teaching. Although oral proficiency is still accounted priority in most general purpose language programs, at least in the early stages, there is no longer any strong conviction that the learners should spend a long time on mastering the spoken form of the language before being exposed to its written

form and writing has been received more attention than before. Mirahmadi (2011, p. 182) suggests that writing is a “technique asset in the process of learning a language.”

In contrast to speaking, the ability to write, both in the first and second language requires instruction. In other words it is not biologically acquired. Usually it is learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Research on first language writing and its impact on second/foreign language writing, as Leki (1991, p. 123, as cited in Ziahoseini and Derakhshan, 2005) believes, date back to 1966, when Robert Kaplan’s study of 600 L2 students’ essays served “in establishing contrastive rhetoric as a new field of inquiry.”

Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience (Hadley, 1993). According to Hadley (1993), some changes have occurred in the area of writing from the time when practice in this skill consisted mainly of writing sentences, in the form of exercises, at one extreme, and of writing compositions at the other. Writing composition implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Perhaps it could be considered as a continuum of activities that has the more mechanical or formal aspects of writing down on the one end and the more complex act of composition on the other end.

There are many factors that affect writing in another language. One of these factors is schemata – “a large complex unit of knowledge that organized much of what we know about general categories of objects, classes of events, and types of people” (Anderson, 1980, cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 42). The culture-specific nature of schemata may lead to difficulties when students write texts in other languages. If one knows how to write a summary or analysis in Mandarin or Spanish does not necessarily mean that s/he will be able to do these things in English (Kern, 2000, cited in Myles, 2002). As such, Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992, as cited in Ziahoseini & Derakhshan, 2005) think the second language writing is to be influenced to some extent by the linguistic and cultural conventions of the writers’ first language.

Although two different language writing systems enjoy strategic, rhetoric, and linguistic differences, the first language models have had a significant influence on the second language writing instruction and the development of a theory of L2 writing (Silva, 1993). Also, according to Ringbom (1992), most foreign language learners have a good knowledge of L1 skills which can be transferred to L2. He argues that writing is “an area in which the foreign language learner may compare quite favorably to many native speakers, who have problems in writing, but no problem in oral fluency” (p. 104). On the other hand, L2 writing skills may also transfer to L1. As a result, students who are skilled at writing in their own native languages and have surpassed a certain L2 proficiency level can transfer those skills. In other words they are capable of transferring writing skills from L1 to L2 or vice versa. However, those who have difficulty in

writing in their native languages may not have a repertoire of strategies to help them in their L1 writing development (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996, as cited in Myles, 2002).

The current research attempts to test the possible relationship between Iranian students' second language (English) and first language (Persian) writing competence. It investigates whether Iranian EFL students writing competence interferes with their Persian writing proficiency.

## 2. THE STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Iran is among those countries where English is taught as a foreign language. One of the main objectives of teaching English in Iran is teaching English writing and composing, and its importance in language learning settings is justifiable. However, exploring the English writing skills is not the concern of this study. The influential effect of learning English writing styles on Iranian university students' Persian writing and composing is an issue which needs and deserves to be investigated.

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of Iranian students' English language proficiency in writing on composing in Persian.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Writing in a second language (L2) is a challenging and complex task. The relationship between thinking and writing is quite clear. They are recursive processes; one has to go back and go forward. Composition involves all thinking skills regardless of the nature of the writing task, as reported by Olson (1984), who stated that "the process of writing requires tapping all the levels of thinking"(p.30). Furthermore, according to Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1979),

Composition involves the production and arrangement of written sentences in a manner appropriate to the purposes of the writer, the person or person addressed, and the function of what is written. It is a complex activity requires a variety of skills (p. 189).

Rivers (1981, p. 291) believes that "writing a language comprehensively is much more difficult than speaking it. When we write, we are, as it were, 'communicating into space'." In other words, when people communicate the message orally; they know who is receiving the message; they receive feedback from the audience. Zamel (1983, cited in Chastain, 1988, p. 252) states that "writing involves the exploration of ideas and thoughts in the process of putting them on paper and the selection of the most appropriate forms to express exactly what one wishes to say." Similarly, Chastain (1988) contends that writing begins with the urge to communicate some information, knowledge, feeling, reaction, request, and so on. In other words, writers have a reason to communicate. Flower and Hayes (1981) argue that writing is one of the most complex mental activities for individuals. It is a form of problem solving where the writer must produce

an organized set of ideas by selecting and arranging from a vast amount of knowledge, then fits what he or she knows to the needs of the reader as well as the rules of writing a text. Writing is one of the most challenging mental activities. “By helping students become better thinkers, we would enable them to become better writers and vice-versa” (Olson 1984, p.31).

According to Silva (1993, as cited in Myles, 2002), most of the research about the second language are dependent on the first language. Some studies have been done in this area. One such study is the one carried out by Mirahmadi (2011). The study was carried out to find if successful first language Iranian writers are distinguished as competent in second language writing as well. A group of 25 junior English students were selected randomly as the participants of this study. They were given two composition tasks in two different sessions. Then, the English and Persian compositions were compared through Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Results showed that there is a positive transfer of first language writing strategy to second language composition.

Another study was done by Alsamadani (2010). The aim of the study was to investigate whether Saudi EFL students’ writing competence was related to their Arabic writing proficiency. Participants included 35 college-level students in English course. They were asked to write English and Arabic argumentative essays on the same topic during two separate sessions. The essays were scored by a group of EFL university teachers using the ESL Composition Profile, and the collected data were used to compare and contrast the participants’ writing competence in Arabic and English. After analyzing data he concluded that there is a strong correlation between participants’ L1 (Arabic) writing proficiency and their L2 (English) writing competence.

Ziahoseini and Derakhshan (2005) studied whether there is a consistency among Iranian EFL students’ performances in L1 and L2 writing tasks and whether there is a cross-linguistic transfer in this respect. In this study the students were asked to write four compositions – two in English and two in Farsi – consisting of an argumentative and a narrative task in each language. The compositions were rated by three raters according to ESL Composition Profile, the data were analyzed by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, SPSS, and it was concluded that there exists a correlation, indicating that there are systematic differences which point in the direction of transfer from L1 to L2.

In a case study, Bhela (1999) tried to determine the observable features of interference of L1 on L2 and what its effects are on the syntactic structure of a written task of second language learners. The participants of the study were a Spanish-speaking 21-year-old female, a Vietnamese-speaking 39-year-old female, a Cambodian-speaking 50-year-old female, and an Italian-speaking 65-year-old male. They were asked to write two stories – one in native language and the other in English – about two sets of sequenced pictures, one at a time. Then their writings were analyzed by four raters. The results showed that students used some L1 structures that led

to appropriate responses in L2. Sometimes they used L1 structures interchangeably and produced inappropriate responses in English, indicating an interference of L1 on L2.

According to results from a study carried out by Stapa and Abdul Majid (2009), the teachers are recommended to use the students' first language for generating ideas among low level proficiency ESL learners. The aim of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of the use of first language to generate ideas for second language writing among low level proficiency ESL learners. It was an experimental research in which the experimental group students were asked to use their first language in generating ideas before they began their essays in English, but in control group, students used English. Then the essays were graded by two independent raters and the obtained data were analyzed through a t-test. The findings showed a remarkable improvement in writing performance of students who used their first language to generate ideas before writing in English.

As such, Kim (2008) investigates Korean L2 writers' previous writing experiences in school in their mother tongue in order to better understand their current knowledge about writing and how their prior knowledge and experiences would affect L2 writing. For this purpose, a questionnaire included the main topics of student perceptions of instruction practices in terms of reading, writing, text types, writing processes, and assessment criteria was administered to a population of 251 Korean high school students. The findings showed that the more L2 writing researchers and teachers know about their Korean students' educational backgrounds, the better decisions they can make in the classroom.

## 4 METHOD

The methodology used in this study was an experimental design.

### 4.1 Participants

Twenty EFL students at Shahrekord Azad University were selected at random for the study – ten boys and ten girls – majoring in English Translation, having passed at least two courses in advanced writing. The age of the participants was within the range of twenty to twenty five.

### 4.2 Instrument

The participants were asked to write a composition on *air pollution* in two languages (i.e., English and Persian). The reason for selecting such a topic was based on the assumption that the topic was familiar, interesting, and general.

### 4.3 Procedure

The participants were asked to write a 200 to 250 words composition in English about the given topic in two days. The reason for this was that time is an effective factor on students' performance. As Raimes (1983) believes, students must be given opportunity to pay attention to

the writing and revising process. When they prepared their writings, the researchers collected them. After 3 days the participants were asked to write another composition on the same topic, but this time in Persian. The same time span and length of text were assigned.

#### 4.4 Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, a number of 40 papers - 20 Persian and 20 English - were submitted for the sake of analysis and correction. In order to achieve partial objectivity, three variables (Table 1) based on NTID Writing Test Categories (adopted from Mirahmadi, 2011) (see the appendix) were selected as follows:

Table 1	
Writing Test Categories	
Variables	Points
Organization	20
Language Use (style)	20
Content	20

The writing samples were collected and submitted to three highly experienced EFL teachers and three highly qualified Persian Literature and Writing teachers at university level for evaluation. They were provided with sufficient time for rating to ensure that the overall reliability among raters has not undertaken the time pressure. It is worth saying that the papers were nameless; instead they were coded, so that the raters would not know the writers. Also, the compositions were distributed randomly among raters to eliminate the recognizable patterns as much as possible.

For evaluating English compositions three variables, based on NTID Writing Test Categories (adopted from Mirahmadi, 2011), were evaluated: 1) Organization, 2) Language Use (Style), and 3) Content. According to Ziahoseini and Derakhshan (2005), these variables are defined as follows: 1) Organization: introduction, logical sequence of ideas, conclusion, and unity. 2) Language Use (Style): vocabulary use and variety of forms. 3) Content: specifics, developments, and thesis.

Persian compositions were rated in the same way, because there is no determined criterion for evaluating Persian Texts.

After evaluating each composition, three scores were considered for three variables in each composition. At last, by adding the three scores of each variable, one total score was computed for each composition. The highest possible score for each variable was 20 and for each composition was 60.

## 5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The gathered data were submitted to three EFL university teachers and the scores for each variable were determined. For each composition, there were three scores (on organization, language use, and content). After that, by means of SPSS 11.5, the collected data for the study were analyzed. At first, the inter-rater reliability was computed. The inter-rater correlations were found to be significantly different from zero.

Secondly, to investigate the correlation issue for three variables based on NTID Writing Test Categories (adopted from Mirahmadi, 2011), the Pearson Product Moment correlation was run. For this purpose, the scores of each variable were correlated and the correlation for each variable was computed. The results showed a highly significant correlation of .732 between English Writing Organization (EO) and Persian Writing Organization (PO). The results of correlation between EO and PO appear in Table 2.

Table 2		
Correlation for EO and PO		
	EO	PO
EO Pearson Correlation Sig. (2.tailed)		.732
PO Pearson Correlation Sig. (2.tailed)	.732	
EO: English Writing Organization; PO: Persian Writing Organization.		

Also, it was evident in the compositions that the students applied paragraph development style not only in their English but also in their Persian compositions. In other words they arranged paragraphs from general to specific, main idea at the first paragraph and the examples in the following paragraphs. Although some of the students wrote the separate sentences in their English compositions without cohesion and coherence, most of them applied discourse markers like *at first*, *so*, *furthermore*, *in fact*, *as a result of*, etc. correctly. In their Persian compositions, they used cohesion and coherence, too. Moreover, they used punctuations in sentences more correctly. But to be certain that such relation exist exactly the Pearson Product Moment correlation was run. As the results showed there is a correlation of .732 between English writing organization and Persian writing organization (Table 2).

To decide if there is correlation for content variable in English and Persian writing, another Pearson Product Moment correlation was carried out. As the table 3 depicts there is a significant correlation of .580 between content in English writing (EC) and content in Persian writing (PC).

Table 3

## Correlation for EC and PC

	EC	PC
EC Pearson Correlation Sig. (2.tailed)		.580
PC Pearson Correlation Sig. (2.tailed)	.580	

EC: content in English writing; PC: content in Persian writing.

To determine if there is any relationship between language use in English writing and Persian another Pearson Product Moment correlation was done whose results appear in Table 4. As it is clear from the table, there is a highly significant correlation of .846 between English Language Use (Style) in Writing (EL) and Persian Language Use (Style) in Writing (PL).

Table 4

## Correlation for EL and PL

	EL	PL
EL Pearson Correlation Sig. (2.tailed)		.846
PL Pearson Correlation Sig. (2.tailed)	.846	

EL: Language Use in English Writing; PV: Language Use in Persian Writing.

Although the table (Table 4) indicates that there is a correlation of .846 between language use in English and Persian compositions that is highly significant, in students' Persian compositions it was evident to some extent, because students transferred some words from English language to Persian language like the following sentences that were found in the students' Persian compositions:

انسان آسایش خویش را گارانتی می کند (Human being guarantees his comfort.)

ما باید بدانیم چه استراتژی بکار گیریم (We have to know which strategy to use.)

The total correlation of .500, which was significant, was found between students' total scores of English and Persian compositions and the results were shown in Table 5. So, it can be interpreted that there is a direct relationship between English language proficiency in writing and composing in Persian. In other words, L2 proficiency affects L1 writing composition.

Table 5

*Total Correlation*

Pairs of Variables	Correlation
EO vs. PO	.732
EV vs. PV	.580
EL vs. PL	.846
Total	.500

And finally, to determine the differences between mean performances a paired t-test was carried out. It was confirmed that there is a significant difference between the mean performances of students' composing in English and Persian. The results are indicated in Table 6.

Table 6

*t-test*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 E-P	-2.20	4.652	1.040	19	.048

Note. df = Degree of freedom; Sig = Level of Significance; E = The Scores of English Compositions;

P = The Scores of Persian Compositions.

As Table 6 shows the observed level of significance is .048 which is less than the probability value .05 ( $p = .048 < .05$ ). It means that the observed difference is not the result of chance alone. Thus, it can be attributed to the effects of learning English in an EFL context that influenced the students' Persian composition.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Like any other experimental study, this research has certain limitations. The limitations are as follows:

The main limitation of the study was lack of enough time. Since the experiment was conducted in class, the researcher had to make sure that the study would not disrupt the syllabus of the course. The researcher was therefore forced to limit the experiment to five sessions.

Another limitation was the number of participants. The study involved a small number of students required for an experimental study; thus, generalizability of findings to other EFL learners is one of the shortcomings of this study.

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## Appendix

*NTID Writing Test Scoring Categories and Descriptors*

**Organization** (20 pts.): This includes such features as:

- \*\* Clear statement of topic placed appropriately
- \*\* Intent is evident to readers
- \*\* Plan of paper could be outlined by reader (i.e., paper is unified and coherent)
- \*\* Appropriate transitions (i.e., transitional markers and clear paragraphing)

**Content** (20 pts.): This includes such features as:

- \*\* Paper addresses the assigned topic
- \*\* Generalizations are supported by examples
- \*\* No extraneous material
- \*\* Pertinence and noteworthiness of ideas

**Language Use** (20 pts.): This includes such features as:

- \*\* Correct use of grammatical structures (sentence and discourse level) and punctuation
- \*\* Correct use of complex structures
- \*\* Intelligible spelling
- \*\* Clarity of style and expression
- \*\* Clarity of reference